In Aristotle's ethics, is being a good human being the same as being good at being human?

Yes, Aristotle claims that being a good human is the same as being good at being human, although the arguments he presents to support this claim are weak. Moreover, there are substantial tensions between what we typically understand being a good human to constitute on one hand, and Aristotle's account of what is required to be good at being human on the other. In this essay, I first disambiguate three distinct senses of goodness, and present Aristotle's view on the relationship between each. Then, I set out one potential objection to his position and a successful defence, as well as two more fundamental flaws. Finally, I conclude that Aristotle does indeed identify being a good human with being good at being human, but that his arguments in favour of this are unconvincing and their weakness undermines part of his project in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

The word "good" in English is ambiguous between at least three different concepts, all of which are relevant to Aristotle's ethics. We can distinguish between:

(1) $\text{Good}_{\text{moral}}$: an agent is $\text{good}_{\text{moral}}$ when they meet the appropriate standard of right conduct or character.[*] *For example: "Jesus was a good man."*

(2) $\text{Good}_{\text{functional}}$: an object or agent is $\text{good}_{\text{functional}}$ when it performs its intended/characteristic activity effectively or skilfully. *For example: "This is a good knife."*

[*] One might also say that an object or outcome is $\text{good}_{\text{moral}}$ when it is deemed valuable by some moral theory (reserving the word "right" to describe valuable *actions*). However, since this essay's focus is the goodness of human individuals as opposed to that of other objects, we can set aside this further meaning.

Commented [u1]: Overall, this is a well-structured and concise introduction; it is good you immediately make explicit your answer to the question (this is something that markers in your exam will be looking for). Even though an introduction need not and probably should not go into muc detail, there are a few points at which you might want to elaborate a bit more in order to make clear the connections between the steps that you aim to take in your paper. See m further comments for some of these.

Commented [u2]: Who is 'we'? And what does 'typical mean and what is the argumentative force of contrasting Aristotle's position with what is 'typically' considered to b the case?

Commented [u3]: Analytic moves such as this through which you introduce your own conceptual and methodological structure to approach a philosophical positi are very much welcome. At this point, it might serve you v briefly to mention the purpose or motivation for this move what does it do for your argument and paper to set out Aristotle's position in this way?

Commented [u4]: Continuing the point on details in an introduction; arguably the most important purpose of the introduction to a philosophical essay is to provide a forma structure of the paper that allows the reader to understand relevance of individual discussions and parts of your pape for its overall argument. This is difficult to do if nothing substantive is communicated about what your objections a the flaws you identify obtain to. We can talk about this in tutorial, but it seems to me that this communicative and guiding task takes precedence over the desideratum of keeping one's introduction short.

Commented [u5]: Two short methodological questions about this approach: First, in which sense is this disambiguation of the attribution of the predicate "good" relevant for Aristotle's ethics, or rather, relevant for the purposes of your paper? This goes back to the point I mad above; make sure not only to describe what it is that you a doing in the paper, but also why (with an eye towards the overall argument or point you wish to make). Related to th first overarching methodological question, why is the ambiguity of the English term "good" a helpful guide to th way the relevant Greek terms are used by Aristotle? It seem at least some justification is required for this move, since your disambiguation relies on drawing distinctions within your conceptual understanding of the term (which is argua shaped by your mastery of the English language) and not v reference to the text.

Commented [u6]: It seems that in your account of good[functional] there is itself an ambiguity or lack of precision when it comes to the nature or origin of the intended or characteristic purpose, which relates for instan to the distinction between an extrinsic or intrinsic perspect on the human function that Barney and Korsgaard bring up seems to me that leaving this out of sight creates problems your discussion of how good[functional] relates to good[prudential], see below.

(3) $\text{Good}_{\text{prudential}}$: an outcome is $\text{good}_{\text{prudential}}$ when it promotes the interests of some agent.

For example: "It's good that she got her banking internship."

In the terminology of the question, we can relatively uncontroversially identify "being a good human being" with (1) $\text{Good}_{\text{moral}}$, and "being good at being human" with (2) $\text{Good}_{\text{functional}}$. The first phrase is clearly referring to ethical conduct – when we say "Emily is a good human being", we mean more than anything else that she conducts herself in a morally admirable way. The second phrase is less straightforward, perhaps because we do not typically think of "being human" as an activity which individuals can be good at performing, but the most natural interpretation is that it relates to how skilfully one carries out the function of a human (assuming such a function exists).

What, then, does Aristotle have to say about the relationship between (1) $\text{Good}_{\text{moral}}$ and (2) $\text{Good}_{\text{functional}}$? As presented in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, his position is that one must have a certain kind of virtue in order to perform one's function as a human being:

> Now each function is completed well by being completed in accord with the virtue proper [to that kind of thing]. (*NE* 1.7, 1098a15-16)

Put differently, an individual is $\text{good}_{\text{functional}}$ only if they have the sort of character that befits an excellent human. Aristotle goes on to sketch out the connection between excellence and ethical conduct, arguing that the characteristics that we need to perform our function well are precisely those qualities commonly called the moral virtues (Korsgaard, 2008). So, it is not that Aristotle *defines* function in terms of moral goodness – indeed, he says that the function of a human is simply that activity which is unique to us (Charles, 2017; *NE* 1.7 1097b35) – but rather that he believes we can show these two concepts are equivalent.

Commented [u7]: Why is this identification uncontroversial? Is it because of the language that is used relation to a particular conception of good that serves as indicator which notion we are confronted with? Arguably, saying that something or someone is "good at" something good[functional], but perhaps in some cases also good[prudential]. Likewise, "being a good x" need not necessarily pertain to good[moral]; after all, this linguistic pattern is reflected in the example you choose for good[functional]. It seems to me this form of matching the different conceptions with certain expressions in English i not quite what you have in mind, but I am also not sure wh you take it from that it is obvious or uncontroversial to identify "being a good human being" with "being a morall good human being".

Commented [u8]: Good! This is an important observati about the relation between the moral virtues and human excellence. In this paragraph and before your first quotatio of the Nicomachean Ethics, it might be worth to spend sor time to clarify the important technical terms that Aristotle relies on here, such as 'virtue', 'function', etc. You do this partially in virtue of the progression of your explanation, b could be done more explicitly.

Commented [RS9]: I'm unsure if Aristotle's view is tha Good_functional is sufficient and necessary for Good_mo Or perhaps there is some other logical relation between th properties.

We will soon come on to examine more closely the nature of this posited human function, but let us first explore Aristotle's other statement about the relationships between the kinds of goodness outlined above:

> Just as the good… for whatever has a function and [characteristic] action seems to depend on its function, the same seems to be true for a human being, if a human being has some function (*NE* 1.7, 1097b25-28)

Here, Aristotle identifies $\text{Good}_{\text{functional}}$ with $\text{Good}_{\text{prudential}}$, claiming that if some S has a function, then S performing that function well is good *for S* (Barney, 2008). Provided that Aristotle can show that there exists a human function (which we have so far assumed to be the case), it will then follow from his other arguments that humans ought (both morally and prudentially) to perform that function.

According to Aristotle, the best candidate for the unique human activity which comprises our function is the exercise of rational thought:

> We take the human function to be a certain kind of life, and take this life to be activity and actions of the soul that involve reason, hence the function of the excellent man is to do this well and finely. (*NE* 1.7, 1098a14-16)

As the wording of the question implies, Aristotle's emphasis is very much on the continuous aspect of *being* a good human. For him, functional and moral excellence is neither something fleeting nor something passively attained, but rather a durable good that flows from a life of virtuous activity (*NE* 1.7, 1098a18-20; *NE* 1.8, 1098b34-1099a1). So, it is an accurate description of Aristotle's views to say that he thinks being a good human being the same as being good at being human.

Commented [u10]: We might have some doubts whether this claim is convincing, but it depends somewhat on the understanding of what makes a reason or good prudential. Prudential reasons are certainly self-regarding in a way that moral reasons, for instance, are not. Now there is a question in which way we spell out the self-regarding nature of these considerations. Perhaps there is a case to be made that prudential reasons are related to conditional or hypothetical imperatives, in the sense that they give reasons dependent on existing motivational structures of the agent (the example you give above seems to be in line with this reading). In this case, if the agent did not have the relevant kind of motivational set or structure, there would also be no corresponding reason. But the way in which virtue is good for or the good of the human being does not quite have this form in the sense of being hypothetically related to the motivational structure of a human agent. Perhaps we can figure out in the tutorial how best to think about this—at this point it is also still somewhat unclear what the identification thesis does for your overall project in the essay.

Commented [u11]: Yes, good. The outline of the Aristotelian argument is grasped well here. I have to say it is not entirely clear to me in what way the tripartite analysis of the concept of 'good' contributes to this conclusion, but we can discuss this.

With a clear understanding of Aristotle's position, we can now examine its shortcomings. The first problem is that it seems as though the exercise of rational thought does not meet Aristotle's criteria for a human function, namely being an activity unique to humans (Charles, 2017). According to Aristotle, the gods are constantly engaged in philosophical contemplation – indeed, this divineness is what makes it so valuable. But how, then, can we say that this is a uniquely human activity? And why not single out one of the many other activities that humans unambiguously are unique in performing, like building ships or telling jokes? Wilkes (1978) presents a reasonable, albeit revisionist, defence, arguing that practical reason is the activity which guides and is served by all (and only) human endeavours, and thus constitutes the human function. Since in the modern day we no longer believe that theoretical reason is divine, a life grounded in practical reason need not lack any completeness of the good, and may very well include some philosophical contemplation. In this way, we can justify why rational thought is the unique human function and therefore rescue Aristotle's notion of being good at being human, although not without giving up his emphasis on theoretical reason.

Commented [u12]: Make sure to offer full quotations, including page numbers, for such references.

Commented [u13]: Yes, this is a good question indeed. might wonder, however, if 'unique to a particular being' captures the full nuance of how Aristotle wants to have the idea of a function to be understood. Is uniqueness really an independently salient criterion?

The examples you offer seem to work only with a rather reductive understanding of what Aristotle takes the human function to be—for function, in his understanding, is tied t what fully realises a being's nature.

Even if we are able to explain how precisely one might be good at being human, though, there are deeper problems for the Aristotle's claims about the relationships between three concepts of goodness.

> Rebecca is a habitual liar. She is the descendant of a long line of swindlers, and has been brought up to continue in this tradition most skilfully. Her falsehoods are complex, self-serving, and highly convincing. Her psychology is such that she cannot think of another way of conducting herself.

Consider first $\text{Good}_{\text{functional}}$ and $\text{Good}_{\text{moral}}$. Is it really true that S performing well the characteristic activity of their type is morally good? Drawing on Charles (2017), we can construct a compelling counterexample:

It seems perfectly reasonable to say that Rebecca's characteristic activity is lying, yet we certainly would not want to commit to the view that her mastery of this is in any respect good. Our intuitions tell

us that, contrary to the implications of Aristotle's beliefs, she is living a morally reprehensible life – and perhaps even one that is worse for herself than it would be were she a less competent liar.

When Aristotle tries to draw a link directly between $\text{Good}_{\text{moral}}$ and $\text{Good}_{\text{prudential}}$, similar problems emerge. His assertion that "actions in accordance with virtue are pleasant by nature, so that they are pleasant both to lovers of the fine and in their own right" (*NE* 1.8, 1098b14-15) demands substantial concessions from our commonsense views about what is pleasant, such as in the following scenario:

> Filip is a soldier at war. He glimpses out of the corner of his eye a grenade that has been tossed into his side's trenches by the enemy. Nobody else has noticed the grenade, and it will shortly detonate. He could either run and take cover for himself, leaving dozens of comrades to perish, or dive onto the grenade, saving his fellow soldiers with the price of his own life.

Again, our intuitions tell us that a truly excellent human would have the courage and compassion to make this ultimate sacrifice, but also that any theory of wellbeing which claims this course of action leads to that individual's flourishing must surely be mistaken. It is therefore hard to maintain the claim that acting in accordance with virtue – or fulfilling one's function – promotes the good, either for oneself or in general.

These flaws are a serious problem for Aristotle's attempt to show that flourishing consists in acting virtuously. Without the equivalence of $\text{Good}_{\text{functional}}$ with $\text{Good}_{\text{moral}}$ or $\text{Good}_{\text{prudential}}$, there is no longer any reason to think that living an ethically excellent life would necessarily benefit an individual. As Wilkes (1978) highlights, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* at first seems to offer a reply to the amoralist, by claiming that possessing moral virtue is in one's own interests. However, these arguments must be understood in their ancient context, where the distinction between the self-regarding and other-regarding was muddier. Seen in this light, Aristotle's aims are less ambitious and slightly more successfully realised, although his failure to convincingly establish why rational thought is the human

Commented [u14]: This example seems at risk of strawmanning the Aristotelian position. Does the characteristic tendency of lying properly qualify as a function? Further, is 'Rebecca' the proper locus of application for the terminology of function?

Commented [u15]: Let's discuss in the tutorial under which sort of understanding of prudential reason such a counterexample has force.

Commented [u16]: The example you bring up can certainly take the form of an interesting challenge to the Aristotelian view but seems to require further developmen In book III, Aristotle discusses cases in which the fulfilme of a human beings' function can come at personal cost (in some sense) to the agent. But in which way exactly would Aristotle still maintain that the action is still intrinsically pleasurable or rewarding? And does this in fact conflict wi what is going on in the scenario you introduce?

Further, your counterexample rests on the assumption that heroic self-sacrifice is indeed the virtuous course of action the given case. You seem to justify this by appeal to "intuition"—but what is the ground for these intuitions an this a suitable way of finding out what the virtuous course action is in the Aristotelian framework?

Commented [u17]: This is an interesting claim on Wilkes's part that we should discuss. Do you agree that Aristotle offers an argument to the amoralist? Is this in lin with what he tells us about the methods of his ethics?

Commented [u18]: What is the basis for the claim that distinction was 'muddier'?

Commented [RS19]: To be honest, I don't really think t is true. Either Aristotle was trying to show that virtues ben their possessor (cf Plato in the Republic and discussion wi Glaucon, I think?) but failed, or there was nothing to show because this was just taken as an assumption.

function puts his subsequent discussions of both the value of contemplation and how to cultivate practical reason onto shaky foundations.

So, to conclude, in Aristotle's ethics being a good human is indeed the same as being good at being human. He identifies moral virtue with excellence in performing humans' characteristic function, which he suggests is the exercise of reason. Although the account is an attractively elegant unification of ethics and rationality, the arguments in support of it are weak. There are tensions in Aristotle's discussion of theoretical and practical wisdom as candidate human functions, and more importantly his broader claim that $\text{Good}_{\text{functional}}$ is the same as either $\text{Good}_{\text{moral}}$ or $\text{Good}_{\text{prudential}}$ is vulnerable to several counterexamples. This undermines Aristotle's ambition of demonstrating that *eudaimonia* captures both what it is admirable to aim for and what best promotes one's own interests.

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Commented [RS20]: (I didn't read this paper especially carefully, or all of the Barney)