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Introduction

This paper will look at Christine M. Korsgaard’s paper, “Aristotle’s Function Argument”, and determine whether her representation of it is a plausible account of the function argument originally delivered by Aristotle. Aristotle aimed to single out the highest human good in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and did so by claiming that each thing has a function, and the highest human function is reason. The notion of ‘function’ has been criticized, mainly for the obvious reason that most things have a variety of functions. Korsgaard reinterprets the notion of function to functioning (*how a thing does what it does* opposed to *what it does*). This way, it avoids criticisms, and arrives back to the conclusion Aristotle argued for; that reason is the highest human good.

As Korsgaard’s argument stands, there are two salient shortcomings in her view. Firstly, it is not plausible that what is true of objects is also true of humans. Secondly, we can draw the criticism that how a thing does what it does is also by functioning in several ways. Therefore, it seems unclear that Korsgaard is correct to determine a highest human good and redeem Aristotle from his own shortcomings. This paper will begin with a brief exposition of Aristotle’s original argument, then dive deeper into what Korsgaard argues in her paper. I will establish that Korsgaard is mistaken that a thing only has one way of functioning, and that the inference from objects to humans is implausible. Thereafter, I will argue that we can in fact consider several ways humans do what they do. Such as biological functions, habits, and art forms such as singing, since these are all without reason. Finally, I will propose to add a condition that may help resolve the issues raised. Namely, if we consider that the most *relevant* function in the *context* of the purpose as a condition to single out the highest good, we can redeem the argument from its shortcomings and successfully conclude that the most *relevant* highest human function is reason.

1.0 Understanding Aristotle

The *Nicomachean Ethics* aims to determine, among other things, what the highest human good is. Aristotle claims that the highest human good is *Eudemonia*, which is commonly translated to ‘happiness’¹. There are five elements to the definition; firstly, it is the function of the human being, it is distinctive to human beings, it involves the

¹ Other translations include flourishing.

exercise of rationality, particularly that rationality functions well, and *Eudemonia* actively expresses virtue.

Aristotle argues that since everything has a function, the highest human good must be the human function. This is the function argument,

Well, perhaps we shall find the best good if we first find the function of a human being... [Does] the carpenter and the leatherworker have their functions and actions, while a human being has none, and is by nature idle, without any function?²

This rhetorical questioning draws on analogies and aims to claim that if we can isolate a function for skilled workers, among other things, human beings must have a function of their own. Aristotle dismisses functions we share with plants and animals, which are living and perceiving. What remains after this, Aristotle claims, is reason. He writes,

Now we take the human function to be a certain kind of life, and take this life to be the soul's activity and actions that express *reason*. Hence... the excellent man's function is to do this finely and well.³

This portrays how Aristotle argues that the highest human good must be a distinct function to humans, and from a process of elimination Aristotle claims that this must be rational activity expressing virtue. By 'virtue' Aristotle means doing that function finely and well. This allows Aristotle to conclude from the function argument that having a good life is due to reasoning well.

1.1 Korsgaard's account of the function argument

Korsgaard's paper aims to deflect objections that have been raised against Aristotle's function argument, and in order to do so it reconstructs the account of 'function'. One thing to note generally about Korsgaard's argument is that she and Aristotle share a common goal, but that the account of 'function' somewhat differs. Aristotle's argument has faced some difficult questions such as: why the human function must be distinct to humankind alone, and why the good of humankind should be the virtuous carrying out of the human function, causing most to dismiss the argument entirely. Korsgaard first gives an account of what Aristotle means both by "function" and what should then be considered the human function. She emphasizes that the function argument has an important role in the overall structure of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. If we plainly reject the function argument, we lose out on the depth of the theory of moral virtues because the theory rests on the *connection* between our rationality and virtue.

² (NE 1.7 1097b 25, 30-33)

³ (1098a13-18, emphasis added)

Korsgaard clarifies two ways of understanding "function", the first being purpose, and the second being how something is function-*ing*. Korsgaard argues that we can understand the function argument only if we interpret Aristotle's use of "function" the second way. Korsgaard concedes that it is, at times, natural to think of function as purpose, and gives examples where Aristotle himself identifies function as purpose, such as when he writes in the *Metaphysics* that the function of a house is to give shelter. By contrast, the latter way of understanding "function" is denoting not what a thing does but rather how a thing does what it does.⁴ Korsgaard gives various examples to clarify this contrast. She writes that a radio has many purposes, such as broadcasting music and news, and serving as an emergency alarm. Yet the way it does what it does is by transmitting electromagnetic waves and making them audible.

Korsgaard argues that we should appeal to function-*ing*, rather than purpose, by arguing that the key to Aristotle's notion of knowledge is form. This is necessary because if one understands the form of a thing, then one understands how this does what it does. Form is more than shape and size, Korsgaard writes, it is knowledge of how something works. She argues that just as one cannot understand the structure without understanding the purpose, one cannot claim to have knowledge of a thing unless one knows how it does what it does. She mentions that even though everyone knows what the heart is for (the purpose), it does not make us all cardiologists. Only someone "who knows that the heart is for, and its structural arrangements, and how those arrangements enable it to do what it does can truly be said to understand it".⁵ Understanding how the structural arrangements enables something to do what it does, is to have knowledge of the form. This is why Korsgaard draws attention to the importance of form in relation to function. To isolate how a thing does what it does, we first need to have knowledge of the form.

Korsgaard's moves on to establish that humans have a specific form that allows us to do what we do; that is by our rational abilities. Claiming that anything that does anything must have a way of functioning, Korsgaard draws on Aristotle's point, that every living thing has a way of *doing what it does*: sustaining its existence and reproduction. Therefore, everything that sustains itself has way in which it does just that, this is its function. Korsgaard writes:

When Aristotle says that the function of a human being is the activity of the rational part of the soul, he does not mean simply that reasoning is the purpose of a human being... He means rather that rational activity is *how we human beings do what we do*, and in particular, how we lead our specific lives.⁶

⁴ (Korsgaard, 138)

⁵ (139)

⁶ (142)

Korsgaard is now getting closer to achieving what Aristotle aimed at with the function argument: connecting the good of humans to rational activity.

2.0 Understanding Korsgaard in the best way possible

In her paper, Korsgaard uses different examples to get her argument across. Here I will argue that the shelf-example Korsgaard portrays is erroneous among her other examples and understanding. Thus it should be dismissed and we should continue to only think of functioning in one way. The shelf example goes as such: Korsgaard asks rhetorically what the function of a shelf is, which she writes is to put things on. She then asks, 'How does a shelf work?', and answers that 'You put things on it'.⁷ This is problematic, because it is fundamentally different from the heart/cardiologist example. Korsgaard says you understand the heart when you understand how the muscle tissue and vessels enable the heart to pump blood. If we accept this definition, we should rather say that how a shelf does what it does is by having horizontal planks, since that is what allows it to serve its function, namely having things put on it. Moreover, a shelf can still serve the purpose of a shelf whether or not a person places something on it. Therefore, we should dismiss this example to avoid further complications later with Korsgaard's argument. To best understand what Korsgaard argues, we should present 'functioning' as such: 'An object/person may have multiple purposes, but only has one way of functioning independently to perform its purposes, this is how it does what it does.'

3.0 More than one way of functioning

Despite Korsgaard's attempt to resolve that an object can have different purposes whilst only having one way of how it does what it does, we can still find counterexamples that an object has more than one way of how it does what it does. Before I discuss the deeper consequences this has for our understanding of human function, I will first consider the case of ordinary objects. Korsgaard explains a radio does what it does by making electromagnetic waves that transmit audible sounds that allow us to listen to the news or hear alarm signals. This seems appropriate for the purposes listed, but if I change the purpose, for instance, by throwing the radio toward a wall in order to damage it, the same way of functioning does not apply. It now seems that the way the radio does what it does is by being an object that has physical properties that enable it to fly through the air at a certain velocity so that it smashes when it hits the wall. Perhaps one might remark that this is trivial because such a property can be said to hold of all physical objects. Yet I would argue that this is not right since these physical properties do not hold of other ordinary objects like feathers. Another example which illustrates this point is a towel. On Korsgaard's definition, I imagine she would say the way in which a towel does what it does (functioning) is by having absorbing properties that enable it to absorb water and dry

⁷ (139)

objects. However, towels can also be used to prank someone. Snapping a towel towards someone would mildly hurt. Here, the way of functioning defined above does not apply. This indicates that some purposes of objects require the object to do what it does in a variety of ways.

In addition to rejecting Korsgaard's premise that objects only have one way of functioning, I will also reject the validity that we can infer what is true of objects to draw conclusions about humans. Korsgaard cannot entail that humans also have one way of functioning, because even if what was true of objects was true of humans, I have shown that is not plausible that objects only have one way of functioning. Indeed, we can imagine since Aristotle had strict ideas about nature being ordered, it would strike him as disorderly if some objects function in a variety of ways, while others only in one. Secondly, it is not clear that there is any support that what is true of objects is also true of humans. It is worth noting, in order to suggest a new formulation in section five, that, if we are interested in the highest human good, we should not derive this from the premise that non-humans have a single way of functioning. Arguing that non-humans have a single way of functioning does not enlighten us to accept the conclusion that humans must also have a single way of functioning. Therefore, we should leave the topic of how objects do what they do and begin to look closer at what other functions, besides those ingrained in rationality, human have.

4.0 The Human Functioning

4.1 Biological Mechanism

I have cast doubt over whether we should accept that the only way a human does what it does is by rational thinking⁸; this section will evaluate other ways we can understand humans to be functioning in more than one way. The first of these is understanding how humans function as biological mechanisms. There exists a crucial connection between a thing's form and function since its form enables it to do how it does what it does. Korsgaard describes the *mechanical construction* in her examples of organs, plants and objects. Just as the heart pumps blood by strong muscle tissue and vessels, the human body is a complex biological mechanism that allow us to breathe, walk around and go about our lives. This certainly constitutes form, and explains how it enables us to sustain our life; breathing and feeding ourselves and so on. It appears, then, that we can appeal to a biological explanation of the human function instead of rationality. To emphasize this point, it is possible to imagine living without rational thoughts (patients in comas, or severely mentally impaired persons), but it would be impossible to imagine a person living without their vital organs or body. This gives us a new way of considering humans' way of functioning differently from rationality. Rationality is dependent on our physical being, our body. This causes

⁸ This, rationality, is the conclusion that Aristotle and Korsgaard reach.

a number of concerns, but primarily, whether we want to accept an account of the human good that sets bodily restraints.

Moreover, I would argue that it is difficult to explain the form of rationality since rationality is an abstract notion. Aristotle tries to divide the soul into three parts, but with our knowledge from modern psychology this is no longer convincing. Although Korsgaard attempts to side-step the abstract notion of form, by describing how someone might have lived well or badly being determined by rationality, it is unclear how we get to this whilst avoiding the criticisms I have just made regarding our biological mechanisms. This casts further doubt on Korsgaard's account.

4.2 Habits

In addition to the biological mechanism claim, we can try to explain how humans do what they do out of habit. For the purpose of this paper let us define habit as a way to sustain oneself by repeated automatic response. Habit is different from instinct, because instinct has evolved over thousands of years, and habits come about individually in a lifetime. As Korsgaard writes, everything that does something has a way it does just that, and we could say that humans just do some things out of habit. It can be out of habit that we brush our teeth twice a day, this is certainly not instinct. Brushing our teeth has health benefits and sustains a particular part of our body that prevents diseases.

Although Korsgaard makes no mention of habit in her text, Aristotle does so in Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. He writes that living well or badly should be praised or blamed if we are concerned with ethics. Habits are neither praiseworthy or blameworthy since they do not involve reasoning. It is not praiseworthy if someone does something good if they are not striving to do the right thing. There are two objections I would like to point out from this response. Firstly, we do in fact characterize some habits as good, and others as bad. Biting one's nails is considered a bad habit, and brushing one's teeth is considered a good habit. So it may not be as difficult as Aristotle suggests to give praise or blame to habits. Secondly, if Aristotle wishes to argue and conclude that rationality is the highest human function, it would be circular reasoning to dismiss habit on the basis that it is not rational. In order for Korsgaard to deflect this objection she could argue that the form of habit is inconsistent with the function. This is however the same problem the notion of rationality faces as an abstract notion, and is therefore a weak statement unless she wants to dismiss rationality altogether.

4.3 Art forms and singing

The last counterexample I will use to portray how humans can be seen as functioning in more than one way is by portraying how humans can be used as art forms, such as music. Singing is a good portrayal of this. At a first glance, this example seems closely related to Robert Nozick's (1981) argument against the original function argument;

that if our function is humor we should think of good jokes. However, good humor actually consists in a lot of rationality, puns are for example spin offs from definitional meanings. Singing is not like this. So if a part of what humans do is singing, rationality cannot explain how we do what we do by rationality.

5.0 Responses to section four

The objections Korsgaard must respond to are first, just because objects are a certain way does not entail that humans are the same certain way. Secondly, if humans have more than one way of functioning, how do we account for the single most highest human good?

To the first question, I would argue that it would be more beneficial to the purpose of the *Nicomachean Ethics* not to argue that since objects have a way of functioning, humans must also. Rather, I suggest that we single out that humans are a distinct conscious species in regards to morality. We care about questions of how we ought to behave. Therefore, the way in which humans behave must be concerned with how we do just that best. Namely, the highest human functioning. This solves the first objection to Korsgaard that I presented in section four.

Giving a new formulation of Korsgaard's reconstruction of the function argument that avoid the criticisms I have raised in this paper and would thereby solve the second question. The problem of having several ways of how humans can be seen as functioning is that we can no longer say, 'this is the thing that determines that this person has lived well'. Remember that Korsgaard explains:

Reason is the function of a human being, because it is how we do what we do, which is to lead a specifically human form of life... it is life in this sense that we primarily have in mind when we say of someone whether he was eudaimon or not.⁹

This means how a person has lived comes down to what that person has decided to live for, namely, the decisions they took that consisted in rational thought. This function, rationality, can therefore be praised and blamed. This seems intuitively plausible, and something we want to hold on to, but we cannot do so when we have established several other ways humans are seen to be functioning. If we claim that one functioning is more relevant than all the others, we are in danger of an infinite debate on which function it is. A possible solution to this is if we include the condition to the formulation; *the most relevant function in the context of the purpose*. This is a better formulation of Korsgaard's reconstruction of the function argument since it includes the context of the function, and singles out the most relevant function regarding to that context. This flexibility of the function argument can answer how we live well or poorly, and other ways of how we do what we do. The highest human good then, as Aristotle writes is Eudemonia, has the given context of morality,

⁹ (143)

therefore the best function for this context is rationality. Lastly, we can attempt to solve that the form of rationality is not an abstract notion by appealing to modern psychology. This definition avoids the worries that above sections outlined.

Conclusion

This paper has looked closely at Korsgaard's reconstruction of Aristotle's function argument. I began by portraying what the original function argument looked like, and then how Korsgaard reconstructed this argument. Once we read function not as purpose, but how we see it as functioning, we get closer to connecting it to the good of humans and deflect earlier objections to the original argument. However, I pointed out that we can see that objects and humans alike are still functioning in more than one way. Thus, in order to avoid these criticisms, we must redefine Korsgaard's construction as the most relevant function in the context of the purpose. Therefore, since humans are moral beings, the most relevant function to this context is rationality as it explains how we do what do when we live well or poorly.

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