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Chapter 25

Well-Being, Eudaimonia, and Nature-Fulfillment



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25.1 Introduction

The concept of eudaimonia, variously translated as ‘happiness,’ ‘well-being,’ ‘wellfare,’ ‘living well,’ or ‘flourishing’ stands prominently as among the most attractive features of Aristotle’s ethics. It is a concept carrying significant philosophical and practical importance; whatever eudaimonia is, it’s the thing that we want both for ourselves and those that we love, something that is worth pursuing for its own sake, and that which makes life “choiceworthy and lacking in nothing.” (1097b15)

In recent decades, there has been a surge of interest among contemporary philosophers in the topic of well-being. There are now a variety of competing theories of well-being including hedonism, desire theory (including informed desire theory), happiness theory, value-fulfillment theory, objective list theory, nature-fulfillment theory, and hybrid theory. Each view also comes in different, sophisticated forms, and the literature continues to grow.¹ The subject of well-being, almost 2500 years after Aristotle’s reflections, remains a vibrant area of philosophical inquiry.

For those interested in ancient Greek philosophy, especially Aristotle in particular, the recent increased interest in the topic of well-being will likely appear as a positive movement. In fact, a number of book-length treatments have been offered in

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¹See Fletcher (2016), particularly chapters 9–15, for discussions of the various theories of well-being on offer.

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recent years defending a neo-Aristotelian account of well-being.² And yet, to many prominent contemporary philosophers, there is something amiss about the attempt to draw on Aristotle to develop an account of well-being. Daniel Haybron comments:

Since modern theorists of well-being generally are not even trying to give accounts of what it is to live well, they are just not in the same game as Aristotelians and other proponents of eudaimonistic ethics... We should not be surprised, then, that Aristotelians and their critics, notably subjectivists about well-being, so often seem to end up talking past each other, and that they frequently regard each others' views with bafflement, if not outright contempt. (Haybron 2008, 171–172)

In *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, L.W. Sumner makes a similar comment: "... however, [Aristotle's] teleological theory is fundamentally misconceived as a theory about the nature of welfare; it is really about something quite different." (Sumner 1996, 80).

There are two distinct reasons suggested by Haybron and Sumner about why Aristotelians, as well as Aristotle himself, may not be discussing well-being. The first is that Aristotelians may be talking about a broader notion of living well, perhaps what we might call the good or most choiceworthy life, which includes both well-being and moral goodness (or virtue) as fundamental, distinct components.³ The second is that Aristotelians take eudaimonia as teleologically determined by human nature and while achieving eudaimonia might entail achieving the life of an excellent human and realizing human goodness, to some this seems significantly different from well-being or what is (non-instrumentally) good for a person. I suspect that both issues are connected; a teleological account of eudaimonia probably fits more easily within discussions of the good or most choiceworthy life.⁴ With regard to the first reason, my take is that although contemporary philosophers would want to argue for a substantive difference between well-being and the good life, Aristotle and Aristotelians more generally would argue that there is no substantial difference between the two: well-being substantively just is the good life, even if the two mark out distinct concepts. For those, who see virtue as constitutive of well-being, the distinction between well-being and the good (or most choiceworthy) life will not carry much significance. But for those like Daniel Haybron and L.W. Sumner who do not accept virtue as constitutive of well-being, this distinction is important.

Turning to the second reason for thinking that the concept of eudaimonia that Aristotle discusses is different from the concept of well-being, a central question concerns whether Aristotle's function argument, which focuses on human goodness or excellence, is about well-being or what is good for human beings. A number of scholars have raised this question and I will say more about this issue at length in Sect. 25.3.

² See Badhwar (2014), LeBar 2013, Russell (2012), and Kraut (2009).

³ Daniel Haybron construes The Good Life in this way. See Haybron (2008), 36–37.

⁴ I thank Anne Baril for a helpful discussion on this point.

In this chapter I aim to establish a clear connection between Aristotle's account of eudaimonia and contemporary reflections on well-being. In my view, some of the difficulties on this matter arise from unclarity concerning both the concept of eudaimonia and the concept of well-being. Achieving a clearer understanding of these concepts will put us in a better position to see that we can interpret Aristotle in a way that provides an account of well-being that rightly merits a significant place in contemporary discussions. By establishing a closer connection between Aristotle's discussion of eudaimonia and well-being I will also show why a broadly Aristotelian, nature-fulfillment account of well-being ought to be taken seriously by contemporary philosophers. Briefly, the nature fulfillment account of well-being consists in two theses: (a) well-being consists in the proper development and exercise of characteristic human powers or capacities and (b) what constitutes proper development and exercise is set by human nature. (Later I will say more about these powers and capacities, and the role human nature plays in this account.) Accordingly, I will move from discussions of Aristotle to a discussion of the nature-fulfillment view of well-being, which may modify Aristotle's actual views in various ways.

In the next section I discuss the concept of well-being, highlighting its normative significance. In Sect. 25.3, I discuss Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia and the role of his function argument in elucidating eudaimonia. In Sect. 25.4, I show how a broadly Aristotelian, nature-fulfillment account of well-being carries certain philosophical advantages over other accounts.

25.2 The Concept of Well-Being

While there is no widely accepted definition of well-being among contemporary theorists, we find a variety of cognate terms and characterizations of well-being. Well-being is closely connected to terms such as "welfare," "happiness," "flourishing," "self-interest," "one's own good," and what is "good for" a subject. Stephen Darwall advocates what is known as the rational care analysis of well-being: well-being is that which one wants for someone insofar as one cares for that person for his or her own sake.⁵ Stephen Campbell analyzes the concept of well-being as the appealing or desirable life: the more desirable or appealing a life is, the better it is for the person living it.⁶

Unfortunately, it is not entirely clear whether contemporary philosophers are all talking about the same thing in discussing "well-being."⁷ As Daniel Haybron hinted above, it could be that subjectivists such as desire-fulfillment theorists may simply have a different concept in mind from objectivists such as Aristotelians. As Stephen Campbell notes, "contrary to initial appearances, there may be multiple topics at

⁵Cf. Darwall (2002).

⁶Cf. Campbell (2016).

⁷This idea is suggested by both Campbell (2016) and Kagan (1994).

work in the well-being literature.”⁸ One of the difficulties with discussions about well-being is that notions such as enjoyment, choiceworthiness, meaningfulness, virtue, or excellence, appear to connect with well-being in some way, but it isn’t entirely clear what the nature of the connections are. Consider two distinct ways such values might be connected to well-being:

1. *Instrumental vs. Non-Instrumental.* Is a good like virtue instrumentally or non-instrumentally connected to well-being? If some good X bears a very tight instrumental connection to well-being, we are more likely to take X as non-instrumentally connected to X. But it is not always easy to distinguish what is merely instrumentally connected to something from what is non-instrumentally connected to it.
2. *Concept vs. Conception.* Is a good such as pleasure or enjoyment a part of the very concept of well-being? Or is it a part of the right conception or substantive account of well-being? This is an important distinction and one that we will see needs to be understood more clearly to determine how Aristotle’s concept of eudaimonia is related to the notion of well-being. By sharing the same concept X but disagreeing about what the best account or conception of X is, we can ensure that we are disagreeing about a common subject matter. But if there are simply different concepts at play among different philosophers discussing “well-being,” then the disagreements may be merely terminological.⁹

As we observed above, L.W. Sumner denies the possibility that the nature-fulfillment account (or “perfectionism”), or objective accounts more generally, are accounts of well-being. This view is also defended by Thomas Hurka:

Well-being itself is often characterized subjectively, in terms of actual or hypothetical desires. Given this subjective characterization, perfectionism cannot concern well-being. Its ideal cannot define the “good for” in a human because the ideal is one he ought to pursue regardless of his desires. In my view, perfectionism should never be expressed in terms of well-being. (Hurka 1993, 17–18)¹⁰

Of course, both Sumner and Hurka can define “well-being” in a technical way to suit their own philosophical purposes. But this does not appear to be what they are doing. Rather, they seem to take themselves as discussing a concept prominent among philosophers that carries some (even if underdeveloped), commonsense meaning.

What we need is to figure out how best to understand the concept of well-being in a way that is most fruitful for philosophical discourse. By taking the very concept of well-being as inherently subjective, Sumner and Hurka seem to rule out by fiat certain theories of well-being that should remain a legitimate pos-

⁸Cf. Campbell (2016).

⁹The distinction between concept and conception is made by Rawls (1999), 9.

¹⁰Dorsey (2010), 60, has criticized Hurka on this point. Note that Hurka and Dorsey use the term “perfectionism” rather than “nature-fulfillment account.”

sibility.¹¹ I propose that well-being ought to be conceived as a notion about what is non-instrumentally good for someone that leaves open whether what is good for someone is wholly constituted by one's attitudes or perspective, or some objective goods (whether determined by one's nature or not). Whether the best account of well-being is subjective or objective (or perhaps some kind of hybrid) remains an open-question.¹²

25.3 Aristotle's Concept of Eudaimonia

In the first five chapters of Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter *NE*), Aristotle's discussion of eudaimonia appears to be quite close to our ordinary notion of happiness or well-being. It's what everyone, philosopher or not, wants: "both ordinary people and people of quality say 'happiness', and suppose that living well and doing well are the same thing as being happy."¹³ (1095a20) And not only do we characteristically desire it, but as the most choiceworthy good, we also have most reason to seek it. Eudaimonia provides us with a formal object of practical reason—a constitutive principle of practical rationality.¹⁴ Given this construal of eudaimonia, one could make a plausible argument that Aristotle is indeed talking about something very close to the modern concept of well-being, which helps explain why the most popular translation of eudaimonia has historically been "happiness." While few people have a philosophically developed picture of happiness, just about everybody has an inchoate notion of it as a significant object of desire.

It is important to also see that Aristotle recognizes a wide range of judgments, even those that are grossly mistaken on his view, as possible accounts of eudaimonia: "[An ordinary person] identifies it with one of the obvious things that anyone would recognize, like pleasure or wealth or honour, while some pick some other thing and others another..." (1095a20) This is a crucial point because Aristotle is willing to concede that these common place views are still *about* eudaimonia, and it seems eminently plausible to think that ordinary people, in citing pleasure or wealth

¹¹ I suspect that one reason they take the notion of well-being in this subjectivist way is that they assume a tight connection between well-being and the perspective of the subject. But it isn't clear exactly why such a tight connection should be built into the concept of well-being. What is plausibly connected to the notion of well-being is the idea that well-being must be suitably connected to the subject in some way. But an objectivist can (and I believe should) accept this aspect of well-being.

¹² One possibility is that "well-being" refers to multiple concepts and that there is no single notion that has primacy. It could be that the concept "well-being" picks out depends on the situation or context. See Alexandrova (2017), 3–25, for a discussion on this topic.

¹³ All translations are from Aristotle (2002).

¹⁴ Sidgwick (1907) would agree with this point, although he would also claim that universal hedonism is the other constitutive principle of practical rationality. See also Lawrence (2009).

as what constitutes eudaimonia, were simply giving their views about what they believed would constitute the best life for themselves, i.e. what their well-being ultimately consists in.

But even if Aristotle is discussing well-being in the first five chapters of the *NE*, there is a controversy about whether Aristotle consistently maintains well-being as the object of his inquiry in later chapters. For in *NE* Book 1, Ch. 7, Aristotle provides the “function argument” to fill in the content of *eudaimonia* as a lifetime of rational activity in accordance with the excellences or virtues. Briefly, the argument is that for anything that has a characteristic function or activity (*ergon*), that thing’s good resides in its functioning well. And since, Aristotle claims, the characteristic activity of a human being is to engage in rational activities, it is the engagement of rational activities in accordance with the virtues or excellences, over a lifetime, that constitutes eudaimonia.

There has been significant scholarly controversy surrounding the function argument which cannot be addressed here.¹⁵ But for our discussion it is significant that according to some commentators, in Ch. 7 of *NE* Aristotle seems to have shifted from discussing what is “good for” human beings to the “good of” or perhaps what is “good as” human beings. To put it another way, while before Book 1, Chapter 7, Aristotle seemed to have been discussing human well-being, in discussing the human function Aristotle seemed to have shifted to discussing what makes someone a good or excellent human. The problem, according to some, is that one could live a life as an excellent human being, exercising one’s basic powers and also live virtuously, but nevertheless, have a life that is bad *for her*.¹⁶

But while many have criticized Aristotle for this illicit change of subject-matter, I think there is a plausible reading of Aristotle that avoids this charge, which is that Aristotle was simply providing a nature-fulfillment account of well-being by appealing to human nature and function.¹⁷ On this reading, Aristotle is providing a way of fleshing out the content of well-being by looking into facts about the nature of human beings: “But perhaps it appears somewhat uncontroversial to say that *happiness* is the chief good, and a more distinct statement of what it is is still required. Well, perhaps this would come about if one established the *function* of human beings.” (1097b25) In introducing the function argument, Aristotle can be understood as providing a way of determining what constitutes well-being by appealing to human nature and the characteristic activities of human beings. After all, if we discovered a new type of living organism and wanted to gain an understanding of what was good or bad for it, it seems that investigating its powers, capacities, inclinations, in short, its *nature* is a reasonable way to go.

It is important to note that by the end of the function argument, we only arrive at a fairly broad characterization of eudaimonia: a lifetime of rational activities done in accordance with the excellences or virtues. What is still left open is what exactly

¹⁵In my view, the best discussion of the function argument is given by Lawrence (2001).

¹⁶See Wilkes (1980) and Whiting (1988).

¹⁷Kraut (2016) and Wilkes (1980) both offer this interpretation.

the virtues are, which is explored at the beginning of *NE* Book II. Even an immoralist like Thrasymachus can accept the function argument; what he would reject is Aristotle's substantive conception of what constitutes the human excellences or virtues.

But some commentators of Aristotle have raised as a potential problem a possible gap between being excellent as a human being and living a life that is good for us. Kathleen Wilkes comments,

...a man may do or live well, in the sense that he performs admirably the activities that his *ergon* ascribes to him, with or without doing well for himself or living a life that is good *for* him. (Wilkes 1980, 203)

And Jennifer Whiting challenges:

Aristotle must establish some connection between a thing's membership in a natural kind and what is beneficially good for that thing—or...some connection between a thing's essential properties and what is beneficial for that thing. (Whiting 1988, 36).

The relationship between well-being or good for, on the one hand, and the *good as* or human excellence on the other, is a difficult topic. Consider a more recent disagreement about whether eudaimonists should take the excellence aspect or the welfare aspect of eudaimonia as more fundamental. Anne Baril helpfully distinguishes these two positions as *excellence-prior* eudaimonism and *welfare-prior* eudaimonism.¹⁸ The main argument for the latter, which Baril defends, is that it preserves one of the most attractive features of eudaimonia, the idea that eudaimonia is a life that is good for the person living it. But for Christopher Toner, it is the excellence or perfection as a human being that is most fundamental to eudaimonia.¹⁹ Toner believes that *welfare-prior* eudaimonism falls prey to the egoism objection and that the agent's welfare, which he concedes is important, should remain secondary to the pursuit of human excellence or perfection.

Where would Aristotle fall within this debate? Gavin Lawrence has proposed that the concept of eudaimonia in Aristotle refers to the teleological good that identifies the *good of* humans, in the sense of their end or point.²⁰ Lawrence argues that it is not at all clear what it would mean to ask whether living well as a human being by fulfilling one's nature is non-instrumentally good for us. Consider these comments:

The idea that an organism's realizing its end, i.e., its functioning successfully, is good for, or beneficial to, it—“*intrinsically and non-instrumentally*” beneficial to it—as yet lacks a sense; my suspicion is that none will be forthcoming (unless being of *benefit* to something can be heard as being to its good, and this as being part of or constitutive of its good: but this is an extension I find hard to hear in the natural profile of the concept...)...Can anything *benefit* from attaining its own proper end?...

¹⁸Cf. Baril (2013).

¹⁹Cf. Toner (2015).

²⁰Cf. Lawrence (2009), 213–217.

Or again, consider an analog with the living body. Health is the functioning well of the body; and it determines—is the *horos*—of what is beneficial and harmful to the body. It is success in a body—its end, the good of the body: but what would it mean to say that its healthy functioning is good *for*, or benefits, the body as such—intrinsically and non-instrumentally good for it? (Lawrence 2009, 212)

In a way, I think Lawrence is right. There is a sense of “well-being” or “good for” that, as Lawrence states, “in the natural profile of the concept” seems quite detached from the kind of teleological good that Aristotle has in mind. Such a sense seems to be operating especially in the discussions by welfare subjectivists such as Sumner or Hurka.²¹ But, as I discussed above, we do not need to take up the kind of subjectivist sense of well-being that Sumner or Hurka advocates.

As Lawrence insightfully points out, there is indeed something odd about claiming that living as an excellent human being or realizing human goodness is non-instrumentally good or beneficial for us, just as it’s strange to say that the heart’s activity of pumping well (its excellent functioning) is non-instrumentally good for or beneficial for the heart. Our talk of benefit or good for seems more suited to discussing those things that help a heart function well (e.g. daily exercise), or what is instrumentally good for hearts, and not the activity of pumping blood.

A partial explanation of what is going on here is that the terms “benefit” or “good for” are often used to discuss what is instrumentally beneficial or good for us. And this appears to be the sense of these terms Lawrence picks up. But, as suggested earlier, the contemporary discussions of well-being and the notions of non-instrumental ‘benefit’ or ‘good for’ connected to well-being ought to be taken as a broad, formal notion of “the best life for humans” that leaves wide open what constitutes such a life. After all, asking about well-being—understood as the life that is best for someone—seems to be a sensible question to ask. Well-being is what we want for ourselves and those we care about; it’s what we have in mind when we wish a blessed life for a couple on their wedding day. And surely what we wish is a life that goes best *for them*.

It seems clear that my own life can go better or worse, and it seems right that the well-being of one individual can vary from the well-being of another individual. So when we ask what the best life is for *x*, i.e. what *x*’s well-being consists in, we are asking about what *x*’s best life consists in.²² Of course, we might then ask, does the best life for *x* consist in the realization of the ends set by human nature, i.e. the good of human beings? Aristotle’s answer is yes, but that is a substantive position that he defends with argumentation, which does not fall out of pure conceptual inquiry.

²¹ Talbot Brewer has also criticized this sense of well-being as incoherent. His view is complex, but I think it overlaps with Lawrence’s position in many ways. See Brewer (2009).

²² In the sense I have in mind, the “for” in the “good for” simply helps to mark out the subject whose advantage or benefit is under question, rather than the perspective or subjective viewpoint of the subject. Interestingly this use of “for” seems to be what Lawrence has in mind in identifying the notion of “for” as the dative of respect. But he believes that the dative of respect only marks out “the good *of* a human, and not *per se* to raise questions of benefit and beneficiaries at all.” (211) On my view, the notion of well-being or non-instrumental ‘good for’ is more closely related to the dative of respect Lawrence identifies.

In response to these ideas Lawrence might concede that in *this* sense of well-being, eudaimonia and well-being are closely connected, but that this notion of ‘well-being’ doesn’t seem to be the concept that contemporary philosophers of well-being have in mind. Indeed, we have seen that at least some philosophers like Sumner or Hurka do seem to have in mind some narrower notion. But as I have discussed above, given the diversity of accounts of well-being defended in recent years (including Aristotelian perfectionism), accepting a broader sense of well-being seems to be how we ought to proceed.

To recap: Aristotle is discussing well-being, which is why in many ways the traditional translation of eudaimonia as “happiness” was quite apt. Eudaimonia, like happiness, is precisely what everybody—philosopher or not—wants for themselves and those they love. But the account he offers is one that appeals to the notion of the teleological good, the good of an organism, i.e. its characteristic functioning. It is by developing and exercising the powers inherent in human nature that one flourishes and lives the best life for oneself. Of course, many contemporary philosophers reject this answer, for example by rejecting the notion of human nature or teleological goodness, but this should be the result of substantive argumentation rather than stipulation.

Given these points, I think Aristotle would have accepted a *welfare-prior* eudaimonism (in the sense of welfare discussed above) but would have argued that excellence or perfectionist value is a fundamental constituent of well-being.²³ Eudaimonia, on my interpretation, is a notion having to do with what is best for a subject, which is why Aristotle takes everyone to agree that we have greatest reason to pursue it and why even those who take eudaimonia to be pleasure or wealth are still giving an account of *eudaimonia* rather than something else. (It would be strange if people generally understood themselves as identifying the teleological good as what they most desire.) But it is through the function argument and an appeal to human nature that Aristotle argues for a substantive conception of eudaimonia or well-being that is constituted by excellent engagement with those characteristic activities set by human nature. While conceptually, well-being and virtuous activities are distinct concepts, metaphysically, well-being may be wholly constituted by virtuous activity. And just as we come to discover that water is H₂O (which is why it is an a posteriori necessary truth), we can also come to discover that well-being is wholly constituted by virtuous activities. Through deeper inquiry (and through proper moral education) we may also come to comprehend that the excellences include those basic moral virtues such as justice, courage, and generosity. What is important is that these remain open questions that are settled through reflection and inquiry rather than verbal fiat.

The relationship between virtue and well-being is an old chestnut, and it is worth emphasizing that while the very idea or concept of well-being should not be conceived as consisting in standard virtues like wisdom, justice, courage, moderation,

²³ Christopher Toner would argue that such a view would suffer from the egoism objection. This is a worry that needs to be carefully addressed. See Toner (2015) 353–354, and Toner (2010), 288–291.

and generosity, they are central features of the Aristotelian account of well-being. These standard virtues enter into the account further downstream, when we work to flesh out an account of characteristic human capacities. On this picture, the virtues bear a systematic connection to the development and exercise of our intellectual, emotional, social, and physical capacities. For example, to sustain bodily health, we need to exercise moderation in eating and drinking.²⁴ The virtue of generosity seems closely tied to our social capacity since at various times in our lives others will seek help from us (as we will from others) and it is an ineliminable aspect of human relationships to engage in reciprocated activities of giving and receiving. In a similar vein, justice is a virtue because a proper expression of our social capacity is to give others their due.²⁵ The general idea, at least, seems fairly clear: virtues are constitutive of well-being because they are indispensable for properly expressing characteristic human capacities.

But a virtuous life sufficient for well-being? Aristotle and Aristotelians more generally have argued that virtues are necessary but not sufficient for well-being since one might lack important external goods or find oneself in tragic circumstances. Aristotle, for example, argued that wealth and friends are necessary for eudaimonia.²⁶ With regard to the possibility of tragic circumstances, Philippa Foot has extensively argued that under some situations (deep) happiness will not be available to the virtuous person, as was the case for the brave “letter-writers” who resisted the Nazis at the cost of their own lives.²⁷ From the perspective of the nature-fulfillment account of well-being, it does seem like the virtues will not be sufficient for well-being since the proper development and exercise of characteristic human capacities require appropriate external conditions. For example, one might have all the virtues, but fail to exercise one’s social capacity due to imprisonment and isolation. Or someone who is tortured or suffers from chronic, debilitating pain will not only be physically damaged but will be unable to engage in intellectual thought. Or one’s life can be tragically cut short. One of the advantages of the nature-fulfillment account of well-being is that it allows us to highlight the various dimensions of human thriving and mark out the kinds of characteristic traits and external conditions that are required for developing our nature as humans.

²⁴ Some virtues like moderation will seem to be more instrumentally connected to well-being. I think there are both instrumental and non-instrumental connections to well-being that different virtues will carry, but I don’t think it matters much. Virtues vary widely and how a particular virtue is connected to human flourishing will also vary as well.

²⁵ I do not mean to claim that the value of justice is exhausted by its connection to our social capacity. And there is, of course, the thorny issue of whether justice is always advantageous to the person who is just, a question that stretches back to Plato. This is a challenging problem, but the nature-fulfillment account does provide a way of making sense of the prudential value of justice for the individual who is just.

²⁶ See *NE* 1099a30-1099b5.

²⁷ Philippa Foot discusses the letter writers and the relationship between virtue and happiness more generally in Foot (2001), ch. 6.

25.4 Advantages for Well-Being Perfectionism

While a number of objections have been raised against nature-fulfillment accounts of well-being, less attention has been paid to the advantages that such an account offers. In this section I want to catalogue some of them to support the view that the nature-fulfillment view, while not without its challenges, is a worthy contender as an account of well-being.

But first, how should we define the nature-fulfillment view? Gwen Bradford defines it as, “the view that the development of certain characteristically human capacities is good.” (Bradford 2016, 124)²⁸ And to identify the characteristic human capacities, we need to provide an account of human nature. But it is important to distinguish two senses of human nature, which Daniel Groll and Micah Lott calls the “statistical concept of human nature” and a non-statistical concept of human nature, which they refer to as the “human form.”²⁹ The statistical concept of human nature will only provide what is statistically common to people, which may include various capacities that are actually bad for us to develop (e.g. racism). The concept of human form, however, draws on an interpretation of human beings as embodying a certain form of life that requires an understanding of notions such as development, maturation, health, and life. On this picture of human nature, the characteristic capacities of human beings are not simply whatever capacities are most prevalent in human beings. The characteristic capacities are what play a critical role in human maturation, socialization, and education. Understanding human nature (or human form) requires grasping the life-cycles and patterns of human life, and the fundamental activities that sustain human families and communities. A proper understanding of human nature is actually an extraordinarily complex enterprise, and cannot simply be read off from a set of empirical data, as those who employ a statistical concept of human nature aim to do.

Now this picture of human nature as the human form will naturally raise the objection that in taking on a normatively laden methodology for grasping nature, Aristotelians are merely dressing up their intuitively held normative judgments with the clothes of nature. The concept of human nature, according to this objection, sits idly, doing no real theoretical work.³⁰

Admitting that more needs to be said in response, one point to make is that appealing to a normative account of nature constituted by certain proper ends *is* doing theoretical work, insofar as it provides a conceptual schema for explaining why certain goods or values are constitutive of human well-being. On this normative

²⁸ It is worth noting that Gwen Bradford uses the term “perfectionism” to refer to what I have called the nature-fulfillment account of well-being. I think the terminology of “nature-fulfillment” is more descriptively helpful and moreover, “perfectionism” sometimes refers to the view that virtue or moral goodness is central to well-being, which does not require any appeal to human nature.

²⁹ Cf. Groll and Lott (2015).

³⁰ See Dorsey (2010) for a defense of this position. Groll and Lott (2015) discuss this issue in fn. 23, 14–15.

schema, we begin with the concept of human nature which is constituted by fundamental, characteristic powers and inclinations that need to be developed, exercised, or satisfied to achieve certain goods that are necessary for human well-being. This broader framework provides us with the backdrop for filling in what is necessary for human beings to develop from infancy to adulthood. If one objects that whether things like growth and maturation, or physical, emotional, and cognitive development are good for us is dependent on human choice, I think the proper reply is that it is unclear what an alternative picture would look like. We are, after all, organisms of a certain kind, constituted by our sort of bodily and mental capacities. The goods that we most cherish such as human affection, love, respect, dignity, honor, or artistic creations are outgrowths of our basic human capacities.³¹

Of course, epistemologically, our understanding of both human goods and human nature arise in tandem—we slowly piece together what constitutes human nature through observation and experience. And although our understanding of human nature is subject to ongoing reflection and is always revisable, it provides us with a way of making sense of what is beneficial or harmful in human life by providing a set of fundamental drives and dispositions that helps make intelligible those various human goods that are necessary to flourish.

These ideas also point toward how pleasure or enjoyment, a constant bugbear for Aristotelian accounts of well-being, will be accounted for within this naturalistic structure. While hedonists will insist that every instance of pleasure is to some extent good for us because of the very nature of pleasure, the Aristotelian will insist that while pleasure is a part of well-being, a full explanation of its prudential goodness cannot be detached from the wider context of human life, including the characteristic ways in which pleasure is connected to substantive human goods like bodily health, friendship, and community. And indeed our judgments about how valuable or good a pleasurable experience is for us does seem to depend on the value or worthwhileness of the activity involved.³² There seems to be a world of difference between a trivial or pointless pleasure and the pleasure connected to deeper, meaningful activities. But pleasure is an enormously complicated topic and a much longer story must be told. My only point here is that the nature-fulfillment view has much more to say about how pleasure is connected to well-being than is sometimes supposed.

³¹One might object here that there are more vicious outgrowths as well such as racism, sexism, or cruelty which clearly seem bad for us. A possible Aristotelian response here will be that these improper outgrowths are not what the basic human capacities are directed toward. The hard question then is how we can distinguish the proper from the improper outgrowths. There are no quick or easy answers. We have to carefully examine each outgrowth and ask questions like “what good does this serve?” or “how does this improve or undermine the development of other human powers?” Our views on these matters should be revisable and open-ended, and situated within our particular historical, social, and cultural context. I thank Micah Lott for raising this objection.

³²J.S. Mill tries to accommodate this idea by appealing to qualitative differences between “higher” and “lower” pleasures. But whether Mill’s view is consistent with hedonism has been a matter of significant controversy.

Let me now turn to three advantages of the nature-fulfillment view.

First, the nature-fulfillment account provides a way of making sense of the intuitive idea that what is good for or of benefit to a subject depends on the kind of thing that it is. Imagine discovering a new, strange looking organism in a jungle. How do we figure out what is good, bad, harmful, or beneficial for it? It is unclear where we would turn to except inquiring into its nature, its characteristic life-form: How does it find food? How does it develop, grow, and mature? What is its typical life-span? Is it a social creature? What kind of cognitive capacity does it possess? How does it reproduce? Without answering such questions it is unclear how we can gain a grip on what is good for this entity.³³ In this way the nature-fulfillment view takes up a kind of methodological naturalism, albeit one that is more interested in the characteristic powers and activities of a species rather than statistical normalcy. Importantly, the inquiry is also not value-neutral in the sense that it does not simply aim to produce a list of tendencies or inclinations that most entities share, but rather, makes an implicit appeal to a context or background that provides some basic understanding of what organisms need.

Secondly, the nature-fulfillment view provides an account of well-being that accommodates certain objectivist intuitions by providing a standard for making evaluative judgments about welfare.³⁴ In this way the nature-fulfillment view is able to accommodate the judgment that what counts as benefit or harm isn't determined simply by the perspective or attitudes of the subject. For example, we have reason to feel sorry for someone who lacks basic emotions of attachment or empathy because they are unable to realize loving relationships. We have reason to fear (and seek a cure for) Alzheimer's disease because losing one's intellectual power is a loss of well-being. Of course the person with the Alzheimer's may be perfectly content, perhaps feeling even happier than he did before the onset of the disease. All the same, it seems that we have good reason to avoid Alzheimer's and seek to eradicate it for purely prudential reasons.

Thirdly, the nature-fulfillment account provides a unified explanation for much of our judgments about well-being. Friendship or loving relationships are good for us on this account because of our social capacity. Knowledge and understanding is good for us because of our cognitive or intellectual capacity. If one holds that goods like knowledge or friendship are prudentially valuable in their own right, by being constitutive of well-being, the nature-fulfillment view can offer a better explanation than subjectivist theories such as hedonism or desire accounts. Moreover, the nature-fulfillment view provides a unified explanation of *why* goods like knowledge or friendship are good for us, which is lacking in objective list theories.

But at this point one might ask just why developing human capacities is good for us. What is the argument for thinking that well-being fundamentally consists in the development and exercise of characteristically human capacities? This is a difficult question to answer since it gets at the most fundamental principle underlying the

³³ See Groll and Lott (2015) for further discussion.

³⁴ Objective list accounts also has this advantage, but lacks the other two advantages.

nature-fulfillment view. One point worth noting is that every account of well-being including hedonism or desire-fulfillment faces a similar kind of challenge. With regard to hedonism one might ask, “why is pleasure fundamentally good for us?” Or with regard to the desire-fulfillment account one might ask, “why is desire satisfaction fundamentally good for us?” Such questions will also be extremely hard for the hedonist or the desire-fulfillment theorist to answer since they call into question the most fundamental principles underlying their positions. Call this the *Foundational Objection*. Answering the foundational objection will require showing how one’s favored account explains a variety of judgments about well-being including the myriad ways in which human beings can fare well or badly. In this chapter I hope to have provided an initial outline of how the nature-fulfillment account might proceed in developing an answer to the foundational objection, although much work remains.

25.5 Conclusion

I have tried to show that Aristotle’s account of eudaimonia provides us with a substantive account of well-being that carries some significant advantages. Perhaps the most attractive aspect is that it takes seriously the fact that human beings are a kind of biological organism and that this has direct implications for what is good or bad for creatures like us.³⁵ Here I think it is also important to separate from the discussion what many moral philosophers who tend to distinguish sharply between the moral and non-moral as the gap between nature and moral normativity. For what is at issue here is not about how moral goodness or virtue can be grounded in some form of naturalism, but how prudential goodness or well-being is best understood when located within a larger human context that draws on the basic patterns and cycles connected to the nature of humans. For example one might endorse ethical non-naturalism but accept well-being perfectionism because one thinks prudential value (and not moral value) is grounded in naturalistic facts about human beings. Of course, Aristotle himself would explain his account of the virtues and moral goodness by appealing to considerations of well-being and human nature, but one can reject that part of Aristotle’s position and still accept a nature-fulfillment account of well-being.

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³⁵Richard Kraut makes this point as well. See Kraut (2016), 27.

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