

6-24-2016

On Aristotle's Function Argument

Angela Han
Pomona College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.pacificu.edu/rescogitans>

 Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Han, Angela (2016) "On Aristotle's Function Argument," *Res Cogitans*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 16. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/2155-4838.1156>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CommonKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Res Cogitans by an authorized administrator of CommonKnowledge. For more information, please contact CommonKnowledge@pacificu.edu.

On Aristotle's Function Argument

Angela Han
Pomona College

Published online: June 24 2016
© Angela Han 2016

Abstract

In this paper, I will reflect upon Aristotle's argument claiming that the function of a human being is to engage in activity of soul in accord with reason (AWR). I will explicate and further defend this argument, which is based on the fact that the function of X must characterize it as an X and set a standard for X's impairment and excellence, and the only candidates for a human's function are: to take in nutrients and grow, to perceive and move, and to engage in activities of soul in accord with reason. I will raise the objection that having a continuous sense of self (CSOS) in addition AWR is a relevant candidate for a human's function that Aristotle did not consider. I will define CSOS as involving being aware of and being able to understand one's own emotions, beliefs, identities, relationships, and experiences at a given time that are relevant to the answering of some question at hand. I will then show that by discounting CSOS as a candidate for characterizing a human being, past what is needed for AWR and considered as separate from AWR, we would be missing a crucial element of what defines a human.

In Book I of his *Nicomachean Ethics*,¹ Aristotle claims that the function of a human being is to engage in activity of soul in accord with reason (AWR)². In this paper, I will first state this claim, then state and explicate Aristotle's argument in support of this claim. This argument is based on the fact that the function of X must characterize it as an X and set a standard for X's impairment and excellence, and the only candidates for a human's function are: to take in nutrients and grow, to perceive and move, and to engage in activities of soul in accord with reason. Since taking in nutrients and growing is a living thing's function, and since perceiving and moving is an animal's function, the only candidate that is left, and therefore must be a human's function, is AWR. I will raise the objection that having a continuous sense of self (CSOS) in addition to AWR is a relevant candidate Aristotle did not consider. Then, I will make a reply on behalf of Aristotle, with problematic implications, that a CSOS plus AWR

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. Rowe, ed. S. Broadie (Oxford University Press, 2002).

² Aristotle 1098a7.

cannot be the function of a human because it does not set an appropriate standard for success and impairment.

In his function argument, Aristotle claims that the function of a human being is to engage in activity of soul in accord with reason.³ By soul, he means something that characterizes an organism as “alive” or a characteristic all living things have. With “in accord with reason,” Aristotle is encompassing: theoretical reasoning— reasoning about what is true and false, utilizing the concept “true;” practical reasoning— reasoning about what is good to do using the concept “good;” emotion shaped (restrained or intensified) by practical reasoning; and action on behalf of practical reasoning (reasoning that something is good to do and so doing it). Practical reasoning also requires a commitment to the correctness of the judgment used to determine something as “good”⁴ which requires 1.) a recognition, using the concept “true,” that the lack of such an evaluative judgment of something as good or bad would be a mistake⁵ and 2.) a recognition of the need to justify the evaluative judgment.⁶ Thus, Aristotle claims that what characterizes humans uniquely, and what sets the standard for impairment or excellence, is their ability to do acts characteristic of living things, in keeping with a human’s ability to reason (both practically and theoretically), and to be directed by reason, either by acting or having shaping emotions based on reason.

He supports this claim with the following premises:

1. The function of an F characterizes it as an F rather than any other kind of thing⁷ and sets the standard for what counts as impairment and excellence⁸ in Fs.
2. The only relevant candidates for the human function are: to take in nutrients and grow,⁹ to perceive¹⁰ and move, and to engage in activities of soul in accord with reason.¹¹
3. Taking in nutrients and growing characterizes something as alive¹²
4. Perceiving and moving characterizes something as animal¹³
5. A human being is not merely alive or merely an animal

³ Aristotle 1098a7.

⁴ Agnieszka Jaworska, “Moral Psychology in Practice: Lessons from Alzheimer’s Disease and the “Terrible Twos,”” 23, 30.

⁵ Jaworska 26, 30, 31.

⁶ Jaworska 28, 31.

⁷ Aristotle 1098a1.

⁸ Aristotle 1097b27

⁹ Aristotle 1098a2

¹⁰ Aristotle 1098a3

¹¹ Aristotle 1098a7

¹² Aristotle 1097b35

¹³ Aristotle 1098a3

6. So, taking in nutrients, growing, perceiving, and moving is not the function of a human being.
- Conclusion. So, to engage in activity of the soul in accord with reason is the function of a human being.

In premise 1, the definition of a “function” is introduced. The function of an F allows one to include or exclude objects in the category of F, based on if those objects can serve that function. It also allows one to determine that an object belongs to that particular category, as opposed to any other category, and provides information like the material and shape of the object. This function is based in 1st actuality, meaning an object has the ability to do something. For example, a shovel has the ability to dig. This is its function, even if it is not currently digging at the moment (which would be 2nd actuality). All shovels can dig and anything that can dig is a shovel. The function of a type of object also sets up the standard of what it is to function well and what it is to function badly, by giving a baseline of what an F ought to be able to do, and thus allowing a source of evaluation of an object as an F to occur. If the object is not meeting the standard, or in other words, is not able to function the way it should, it allows one to identify that object as impaired or not fully formed. This depends on if the object is in the process of *becoming* an F (then, not fully-formed) or if the object has regressed from being able to act as an F (then, impaired). If the object is exceeding this standard by doing its function well, it is excellent. If a shovel cannot dig, it is impaired or not fully formed. If a shovel digs well, it is an excellent shovel.

Premise two can be defended in that to take in nutrients and grow, to perceive and move, and to engage in activities of soul in accord with reason are all candidates because by observation, one can see that all human beings do these activities. Humans eat and grow, they use their senses or take in their surroundings and move accordingly, and they exhibit activity in accord with reason, as human beings reason about what is true and false, what is “good” and good to do, and act or emote with influence from reasoning. These are relevant candidates in identifying the function of a human being, because they can set the standard for whether or not a human is meeting his/ her function. If a human cannot do one of these things, we typically think there is something wrong, which implies that the human is falling short of some standard that all human beings typically meet, or some function that all human beings typically have.

For premise 3, I will define growing as: an overall extension of a collective being that would respond to the removal of any piece of itself that it has grown, and taking in nutrients as: an intake of external resources. This premise can be defended by the fact that all living things take in nutrients and do this kind of growing, from trees, to horses, to human beings. If a living things such as a tree, horse, or human could not do this, possibly because they could no longer break down or ingest nutrients and direct them towards growing, they would be considered impaired. Furthermore, things that are not

alive do not take in nutrients and grow, like rocks and dirt, demonstrating it is a characteristic of living things only. Thus, since one could determine that something is living due to the fact that it is taking in nutrients and growing, one can say this is the function of living things.

To defend premise 4, I will define perceiving as taking in external stimuli through the senses and moving as a change in position of body and/or location. This is something all animals do, as all animals must do this in order to survive. Bears do this, cows do this, foxes do this, and all the other members of the animal kingdom do this. If an animal did not move or perceive, we would consider that animal either not fully developed or impaired- a bear that was blind or paralyzed would be considered impaired. Furthermore, organisms that are not animals do not do this, like fungi and plants, demonstrating this is a characteristic defining of animals only. Thus, since one could determine that something is an animal due to the fact that it is perceiving and moving, one can say that this the function of animals.

To defend premise 5, one can see how humans could not be classified as merely an animal or as alive. It is a more specific category that not all animals and not all living things can fall under. There is something else shared in humans that sets them apart from other animals and living things. One could look at a sample of living things or of animals and be able to pick out the humans within the sample, because something else characterizes a human specifically as not just being an animal or living thing.

This leads to premise 6, because the function of a human cannot be to take in nutrients and grow, because that is the function of a living thing, and it cannot be to perceive and move, because that is the function of an animal, and the function of one thing cannot characterize two different things.

Now, I will offer an objection by claiming there is another relevant candidate for the human function that is not included in Aristotle's list of "the only relevant candidates" in premise 2. This relevant candidate is to engage in activity of soul in accord with reason, *and* with a continuous sense of self.

I will support this objection using the following premises:

- I. A sense of self (SOS) involves being aware of and being able to understand one's own emotions, beliefs, identities, relationships, and experiences at a given time that are relevant to the answering of some question at hand.
- II. A continuous sense of self (CSOS) involves all that is needed for a sense of self plus having the ability to *connect* one's past and present self,

through remembering one's past relationships, and what one has believed, emoted, identified as, and experienced in the past.

III. A CSOS is needed for AWR.

IV. But, even if one has a CSOS to the extent needed for AWR, a CSOS still has its own standard of what it is to do well, independent of what it is to do AWR well.

V. Thus, a CSOS is different from AWR.

VI. All humans can have a CSOS if fully formed and not impaired.

VII. And, a CSOS can set the appropriate standard for disability and success.

VIII. Non-humans cannot have a CSOS, so a CSOS can characterize something as human.

Conclusion. Therefore, to engage in activity of the soul in accord with reason and with a continuous sense of self is a relevant candidate for the function of a human being that Aristotle did not include.

To further explicate premise 1, I will use an example case to give a better picture of what a sense of self is. If one were to suddenly feel consumed by anger at another person, the question one might desire to answer at that given point in time is, "Why am I, person X, angry at person Y right now?" Then, X would try to become aware of and understand any emotions, beliefs, identities, relationships, and experiences that may be relevant to answering this question. For instance, the relevant emotion would be anger, and being aware of this anger's degree can help X find out what the logical source is. X could also consider any relevant identities, that is, any personality traits or labels X uses to describe him/herself. Maybe X knows him/herself to be very hot-tempered, especially in regards to punctuality. And then, X might think on his/her beliefs, that is, what X believes to be true and false in the world. Maybe X thinks it to be true that it is a sign of disrespect if someone arrives late. And, X might take into consideration that his/her relationship to Y is one of a spouse. And, from drawing on relevant past experiences, X might recall that Y is always making X wait and Y just arrived late just now. Now, X can answer why he/ she is angry. X could also ask, "What is the best action for me to enact right now?" or "How do I feel about this situation?" or other questions and use the same method.

To explicate premise 2, I will define being able to connect one's past and present self as involving the recollection of one's past relationships, emotions, beliefs, identities, and experiences in the past, and using this information to tie one's past self and present self together as one and the same person.

To explicate premise 3, in AWR, one needs to reason, and to reason, one needs at least enough of a CSOS to hold onto what one believes, feels, identifies, has a relationship to, and emotes (as all can go into making a reasoned judgment) through the time needed

to deliberate. Many decisions about what is true, good, good to do, and emotions that are good to shape, take longer than a moment to reason through and make, and one must have a CSOS long enough to get through the whole reasoning process and also through executing the action and shaping the emotion (if necessary) in order to be able to have practical reasoning, theoretical reasoning, actions based on practical reasoning, and emotions shaped by practical reasoning.

Premise 4 could be defended by the fact that one could still do AWR, that is, one can have enough of a CSOS to succeed at AWR, but have an impaired CSOS. To succeed at AWR, all one really needs are small chunks of a CSOS, long enough to carry out deliberation, and those chunks could even be completely discontinuous with one another, indicating an impaired CSOS. Thus, the standard of succeeding at AWR and CSOS is different. In order to succeed in having a CSOS, one must at the very minimum be able to connect one's sense of self from one's past deliberation to the unrelated deliberation immediately following, let alone be able to connect one's self from 10 years ago to one's present self, but succeeding at AWR does not even require this minimum.

Thus, premise 5 follows, as succeeding in AWR does not *necessarily* entail succeeding in having a CSOS, which it should if they are the same thing.

To defend premise 6, I will present a case study of a human subject, NN, age 39, who suffered trauma resulting in retrograde amnesia.¹⁴ This retrograde amnesia made it so that he could not remember anything from his own personal past, though he could still remember things external from himself, like facts about public events, and still had the implicit skills he had developed earlier. Thus, the only damage that NN sustained was his ability to connect his past self to his present self, as he had no way to link between the two. He could still reason using these external facts and implicit skills he still retained, he just did not have a CSOS.¹⁵ Intuitively, we would call NN's inability to remember his past self and connect it to his present self an impairment in a fully-formed human, and indeed, if this lack of CSOS were not an unusual case, researchers would not have written a case study about it. So, it must be true that ordinarily, in humans who are not impaired and are fully formed, humans should be able to have a CSOS.

To defend premise 7, I will show how a CSOS can set the standard for impairment and success that falls in line with intuitive declarations. For example, if one were to be

¹⁴ K. Henning-Fast, F. Meister, T. Frodl, A. Beraldi, F. Padberg, R. Engel, M. Reiser, H. Moller, and T. Meindl, "A Case of Persistent Retrograde Amnesia Following a Dissociative Fugue: Neuropsychological and Neurofunctional Underpinnings of Loss of Autobiographical Memory and Self-Awareness," *Neuropsychologia* 46 (2008): 2993-3005.

¹⁵ Henning-Fast *et al.* 2995

missing a 5 year chunk of one's life where one could not recall a single relevant (to a present question) emotion, belief, identity, relationship, or experience that one held in that period of time, we would intuitively call that person impaired. We would also call that person impaired against the standard set by CSOS, because there is a huge discontinuity that would make it difficult for one to connect one's past self with one's present self. Or, if someone were to fail in just having a sense of self, in other words, if one were not aware of or could not understand relevant emotions, beliefs, identities, relationships, and experiences at a given time, we would intuitively call that person impaired, and as that person is impaired in just having a SOS, let alone a CSOS, the standard would also judge them to be impaired as well. However, if there were a person who could continuously trace back a connection from his/her present self all the way back to their early years, albeit noticing changes in their self over the course of time, and could understand one's relevant emotions, beliefs, identities, relationships, and experiences at a given time well and answer the relevant question well, we would intuitively say that the person is succeeding, or doing well, above just the normal person. And, according to the standard set by a CSOS, that person would be judged as succeeding as well.

To defend premise 8, I will refer to the fact that although the ability to recognize one's self, as demonstrated by being able to recognize one's self in the mirror, does indicate a sort of rudimentary sense of self, it does not meet the standards needed for a CSOS or even a complete SOS. This ability for mirror self-recognition (MSR) has been found in great apes, chimpanzees, monkeys, lesser apes, elephants, African gray parrots,¹⁶ dolphins,¹⁷ and magpies,¹⁸ but MSR in animals is the equivalent of a toddler recognizing him or herself in the mirror. MSR emerges around "18-24 months of age and marks the beginning of a developmental process of achieving increasingly abstract psychological levels of self-awareness, including introspection and mental state attribution."¹⁹ Thus, even if animals exhibit MSR, it may be the first step in exhibiting a more complete and complex SOS, but it is just that- the first step. It is by no means the whole ability. Furthermore, the fact that it is analogous to a toddler's developing SOS proves that this is not the equivalent of even a fully developed SOS that humans exhibit. One would hardly consider a toddler's SOS close to meeting the standard, let alone excelling at it. And, "autobiographical memory relies on complex interactions between different memory systems... and on a sense of self-continuity over the course of one's life"²⁰ and this "ability to vividly re-experience autobiographical memories is

¹⁶ Diana Reiss and Lori Marino, "Mirror Self-Recognition in the Bottlenose Dolphin: A Case of Cognitive Convergence," *National Academy of Sciences* 98 (2001): 5937.

¹⁷ Diana Reiss and Lori Marino 5942.

¹⁸ Bruce Bower, "Magpies Check Themselves Out: Reactions to Mirror Image Suggest Self-Recognition," *Society for Science & the Public* 174 (2008): 10.

¹⁹ Diana Reiss and Lori Marino 5937.

²⁰ Henning-Fast *et al.* 2993

thought to be unique to humans”²¹ since “the autobiographical self relies on linguistic abilities that only humans possess.”²² Thus, animals not only do not have a full CSOS needed for a CSOS, they also do not have the cognitive skills required for this connecting of past and present self. Then, the conclusion of the objection follows.

Aristotle might reply that the objection is based on a false claim in premise 7. He might ask, how continuous does one’s CSOS have to be and how far in the past does it have to extend to in order to meet the standard? As this standard is not clear, he might argue that a CSOS might set the standard for non-impairment to be able to connect every single day in your past from birth to present. This would then set an inappropriate standard for success and impairment, contrary to objection premise 7’s claim, because this standard would declare people to be impaired when we would not intuitively call them impaired. So, the only way one could save the heart of this argument would be if one were to limit CSOS to something more feasible— for example, by judging one’s CSOS by one’s ability to engage in AWR. But then, CSOS would be limited to exactly AWR, and thus would be no different from AWR.

However, this reply has problematic implications. If we did not take into account a person’s CSOS in characterizing them as a human being, past what is needed for AWR and considered as separate from AWR, we would be missing a crucial element of the human experience. By limiting the amount of CSOS that one needs to only AWR, this reply implies that we are not missing anything if we cannot feel connected to our past selves past making a decision. And, by limiting the good of CSOS as only in aiding in AWR, this discounts other things a CSOS is good for, or its goodness for its own sake. Without CSOS, there is much one can feel like one is missing if one cannot remember the emotions, beliefs, relationships, and experiences one held in the past. Tracing the influence of the past on our present selves, recalling all one has been through, and seeing how far one has come and developed as a person are all goods one would be deprived of without a true CSOS, separate from and greater than just AWR.

The main claim that was explored in this paper was Aristotle’s argument that the function of a human being is to engage in activity of the soul in accord with reason (AWR). I objected to this by raising another relevant candidate, AWR with a continuous sense of self, which Aristotle excluded. I then replied on Aristotle’s behalf by claiming that the standard set by CSOS is one that is not appropriate for determining impairment and success in humans. I explored the implications of this reply by showing how if one were limited to just evaluating CSOS in terms of AWR, then one would be discounting all of the things CSOS outside of AWR can provide. The next question that should be explored is *why* we feel the need to have a sense of our selves and our place in the world, not just why we are capable of it, but why we *desire* this

²¹ Henning-Fast *et al.* 2993

²² Uwe Herwig, “Me, Myself, and I,” *Scientific American Mind* 21 (2010): 61.

kind of knowledge. If we are able to discover the answer to that question, we will have a greater understanding of what exactly is at stake in our endeavor to answer these questions.

References

Aristotle, C. J. Rowe, and Sarah Broadie. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Bower, Bruce. "Magpies Check Themselves Out: Reactions to Mirror Image Suggest Self-Recognition." *Science News* 174.6 (2008): 10.

Henning-Fast, Kristina, Franziska Meister, Thomas Frodl, Anna Beraldi, Frank Padberg, Rolf R. Engel, Maximilian Reiser, Hans-Jurgen Moller, and Thomas Meidl. "A Case of Persistent Retrograde Amnesia Following a Dissociative Fugue: Neuropsychological and Neurofunctional Underpinings of Loss of Autobiographical Memory and Self-Awareness." *Neuropsychologia* 46.12 (2008): 2993-3005.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.neuropsychologia.2008.06.014>

Herwig, Uwe. "Me, Myself and I." *Scientific American Mind* 21.3 (2010): 58-63.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/scientificamericanmind0710-58>

Jaworska, Agnieszka. "Moral Psychology in Practice: Lessons from Alzheimer's Disease and the 'Terrible Twos.'" (Unpublished preprint).

Reiss, Diana, and Lori Marino. "Mirror Self-recognition in the Bottlenose Dolphin: A Case of Cognitive Convergence." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 98.10 (2001): 5937-942. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1073/pnas.101086398>