

Posing the Question

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The goal of this set of chapters is to find out how to live a fulfilling life. To do that we need to determine what human nature is, because the nature of a thing (here “thing” means anything, animate or inanimate, human or not) – what a thing is, essentially – determines or at least gives us very good clues to two things: what it is good for or good at, and what is good for it. When a thing is doing what it is good at and getting what is good for it, then it is functioning well. The internal experience of functioning well is – in human terms – fulfillment, a fulfilling life.

By “fulfilling life” I mean what the Classical Greeks called *eudaimonia*, sometimes spelled *eudaemonia*. Often translated as “happiness,” or “human flourishing,” the word is comprised of ‘eu’ meaning “well” and ‘daimon’ (or *daemon*), which refers to a spirit being. A daimon, the Greeks thought, is a disembodied being somewhere between mortals and gods. It is not necessarily malevolent, as the English term “demon” denotes. There were eudaimons, beneficial spirits, and kakodaimons, malicious spirits. If one were accompanied by a eudaimon, a sort of guardian angel, then one’s life would go well; hence, the translation “happiness.”¹

Whether or not you believe that people can be accompanied by beneficial or malicious spirits, there is one spirit that always accompanies each one of us, our own spirit, our own soul, in the sense of coherence of interiority (see the chapter on [Self, Soul and Ego](#)). By extension of the Greek idea, then, we can say that *eudaimonia* means wellness of soul. If our own interiority is healthy and functioning well, then we experience a feeling of well-being. Our interiority, of course, is not separate from our exteriority, so if we are healthy and functioning well, then we are happy.

Consider physical exercise. If one’s body is functioning well – meaning, purely mechanically, all the bones and muscles and sinews operate together smoothly and each element has sufficient strength and endurance – then it feels good to move. The pleasure of exercising a healthy body is not something separate from the exercise, not something that comes about as a result of the exercise. It is simply the exercise itself, experienced from the inside.

Similarly, the feeling of well-being that we experience when our life is going well is not separate from the healthy functioning of the various aspects of who we are; it is simply our own healthy functioning observed from the inside, from the first-person point of view. Functioning well means doing what we are good at, and doing it in a good way, a way that promotes and enhances our ability to do it. When we function well, we experience happiness, fulfillment, *eudaimonia*.

Happiness in this sense is not the same as pleasure. It is possible to feel pleasure but not be functioning well, as anybody who has experienced an addiction, such as

¹ Wikipedia, “Daemon,” “Eudaimonia” and “Eudaimonism.”

alcoholism, can attest. The goal is not pleasure, although certainly the feeling of well-being that accompanies healthy functioning is pleasurable.

Nor, interestingly, is the goal the feeling of well-being. The goal is healthy functioning, and a feeling of well-being typically accompanies such functioning. If one focuses on the feeling rather than the functioning, however, it is easy to get sidetracked and end up with temporary pleasure but long-term misery, or at least less than optimal functioning, and hence less fulfillment than otherwise possible.

There are things that some of us are good at and others are not. Some have special talents for sports, for instance, or mathematics or music, but not everyone does. On an individual level, each of us needs to find out what he or she is good at personally, or idiosyncratically, and pursue and develop those talents.

There are also things that everybody is good at, by virtue of being a human being. That's what these chapters are about: what humans are essentially and how we can function in an excellent way. The Greek word for "excellence" was *areté*. Sometimes translated as "virtue," it really means effectiveness in the world.² For instance, the excellence of a ship-builder is to build ships that themselves are excellent, that is, that stay afloat, handle easily, travel quickly and haul people and goods safely. An excellent horse trainer produces excellent horses; and the excellence of a horse is that it runs fast, is easily trained, does not flinch in battle, and so forth. An excellent teacher imparts knowledge skillfully and accurately, and an excellent student learns quickly. These are all examples –and there are many more – of people and things fulfilling their function, and doing so well. To be an excellent human being, then, means to do well what humans do.

Essential human nature is that which is present in all instances of being human. If a being lacks an essential element of human nature, we judge it not human. So we need to determine what essential human nature is, what humans essentially or truly are.

It is certainly possible to generalize; but we must be careful, for people make all kinds of assertions about human nature. We need to evaluate them and see which ones are backed up by evidence, or else we risk drawing conclusions from opinions that might not be true.

A related danger is to assert a factual claim about human nature that really expresses a wish about how one would like people to be. Phrases such as "truly human" or "essential human nature" can be descriptive but can also be implicitly prescriptive, recommending a way to be or to act. Here is an example:

"It is still my firm conviction that human nature is essentially compassionate, gentle.... Anger, violence and aggression may certainly arise, but I think it's on a secondary or more superficial level; in a sense, they arise when we are frustrated in our efforts to achieve love and affection. They are not part of our most basic, underlying nature."³

² Hooker, Richard, "Areté."

³ Dalai Lama, *The Art of Happiness*, p. 39.

We have yet to determine what humans' most basic, underlying nature is. For now, it's clear that people do in fact act violently and aggressively and do in fact act compassionately and gently. From a purely descriptive point of view, it seems clear that both are part of human nature.

We can describe human nature in several ways. No one way is complete; all shed light on the subject from various viewpoints. The following chapters take up several different facets of human nature. First I describe human nature from an objective, scientific, third-person point of view. Then I describe it from the first person point of view. Finally I take the first-person point of view to its extreme and make some metaphysical speculations and assertions.

I regard this as a work in progress, subject to further revision. If you have ideas, comments or suggestions for improvement, I would love to hear about them. Please contact me through my website, <http://www.bmeacham.com/>.

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Revision History

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