

Other Things Have a Purpose... Why Not Human Beings?

In the relativist climate of our postmodern world, it's becoming more typical to believe that human beings have no single, ultimate purpose – that “purpose” is something purely determined by the will of each individual.

But in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle contended that just as other things have a purpose for which they are made, or a function they are called to perform, so human beings must also have an ultimate purpose:

“But presumably the remark that the best good is happiness is apparently something [generally] agreed, and we still need a clearer statement of what the best good is. Perhaps, then, we shall find this if we first grasp the function of a human being. For just as the good, i.e., [doing] well, for a flautist, a sculptor, and every craftsman, and, in general, for whatever has a function and [characteristic] action, seems to depend on its function, the same seems to be true for a human being, if a human being has some function.

Then do the carpenter and the leather worker have their functions and actions, but has a human being no function? Is he by nature idle, without any function? Or, just as eye, hand, foot, and, in general, every [bodily] part apparently has its function, may we likewise ascribe to a human being some function apart from all of these?”

If a human being did not have a purpose, I believe Aristotle would regard it as inferior to those things whose purpose is discoverable, or created, through reason.

He then moves on to a discussion of what the purpose of a human being is, eventually concluding the following:

"We take the human function to be a certain kind of life, and take this life to be activity and actions of the soul that involve reason; hence the function of the excellent man is to do this well and finely."

For Aristotle, the purpose of the human being is an active life of reason and virtue. It is this which leads to happiness (*eudaimonia*). It seems like this purpose, arrived at through philosophy, is general enough that we do not need to resort to relativism.