UNIT 3: ARISTOTELIAN ETHICS OF EUDAIMONIA

UNIT STRUCTURE

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3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to

- explain the importance of Aristotle's ethics of eudaimonia as set in Nicomachean Ethics.
- explain the meaning of the term eudaimonia.
- know the meaning of human good in Aristotlian eudaimonia.
- explore the basic argument of eudaimonia, i.e., Function Argument.
- discuss the basic concept of virtue and the traits of virtue
- discuss the doctrine of the mean.
- explore the relation between eudaimonia and philosophy.

3.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces to you the concept of eudaimonia as laid down in Aristotle's philosophy. Eudaimonia is one of the central concepts in

Aristotle's philosophy. Aristotle was a rare ingenious. Metaphysics, logic, ethics and politics, natural philosophy, philosophy of mind, rhetoric-every branch of philosophy was handled by Aristotle with his extra-ordinarily minute intelligence. In fact, Aristotle was the first western thinker to divide philosophy into the said branches. Aristotle's writings that have come down to us are academic treatises. The treatises are cast in a questioning, argumentative and non-dogmatic style. Three works on ethics have come down under Aristotle's name: Nicomachean Ethics (NE) in ten 'books', Eudemian Ethics (EE) in eight 'books', and so-called Magna Moralia or 'great ethics'. The last is perhaps not by Aristotle but may be a recorded lecture course by his pupil. Aristotle's ethics, most completely formulated in Nichomachean Ethics comes to have followed from the teleological view of reality. The teleological view is associated with the concept that the nature of a thing aims at its formal cause. Aristotle applied this notion of formal cause to ethics. Nichomachean Ethics chiefly deals with the guiding question: what is the best thing for a human being? Aristotle says that it is man by virtue of his nature that he/she seeks: eudaimonia (happiness).

3.3 MEANING OF EUDAIMONIA

Eudaimonia, also known as eudaemonia or eudemonia is a Greek word commonly translated as happiness or welfare. Sometimes eudaimonia is more accurately translated as "human flourishing". Etymologically, eudaimonia consists of two words, namely, "eu" ("good") and "daimon" ("spirit"). To be eudaimon is therefore to be living in a way that is well favoured by god. Aristotle never used eudaimon merely in the etymological sense of the term. He regards 'eudaimon' as a substitute for eu zen (living well).

Eudaimonia is not to be understood in the ordinary sense of the term happiness. The following points are to be kept in mind in order to know about Aristotle's eudaimonia.

1. We can talk of people being happy as a psychological state. But eudaimonia is not a state of mind, but relates to an activity - the activity of living. A good life is one that realizes the full potential that a human

life has.

2. Eudaimonia is not something subjective, but objective. To say someone is or was eudaimon is to make an objective judgement about their life as a good human life

3. Eudaimonia is not something easily changed. It does not come and go as happiness (in the usual sense) can. For it is an evaluation of a life (a life lived well) or a person (a good person) as a whole. Judgments related to eudaimonia are stable judgments.

3.4 THE HUMAN GOOD

Aristotle's ethical writings belong to his practical philosophy. In Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle says that his ethical enquiries are not undertaken for the sake of theoretical understanding as the others (such as metaphysics or natural philosophy) are, since the aim of the investigation is not to know what goodness is, but to become good.

Aristotle begins the Nicomachean Ethics with the question 'What is the good for human beings?' This means that for Aristotle, ethics is the inquiry into the human good. He says: "Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim." But what is the highest of all goods attainable by action? What is it that we are aiming at, that would provide a successful, fulfilling, good life? Our different activities aim at various 'goods'. For example, the end of the medical art is health, that of shipbuilding a vessel, that of strategy victory, that of economics wealth. For any action or activity, there is a purpose for which we undertake it and the purpose is nothing but an 'end'. What is this 'end'? Aristotle confirms it to be happiness. Everyone seems to be agreed that eudaimonia (i.e. happiness, ?ourishing, or well-being) is the highest end, but people di?er on what living well consists in. It is thought that there are three 'lives' in contention: (a) some people think it consists in getting as much enjoyment as possible, (b) others that it is a life of political achievement,

and (c) others that is the life of the intellect. Aristotle does not consider either of these three to be the contender for happiness. Even he dismissed a fourth contender for the best life: the pursuit of wealth. The reason behind this dismissal is that wealth is sought for something else. Aristotle says that eudaimonia satis?es two conditions which the supreme good must satisfy, ?rst that it is sought for its own sake and secondly that it is by itself su?cient to make life "choice worthy and lacking nothing". Both conditions have been held to point towards an "inclusive" conception of eudaimonia, i.e. a conception of the supreme good as a life in which the best possible combination of speci?c goods is achieved. It can be observed here that Aristotle's aim is to move towards a substantive account of the best life for humans from consideration, in terms of his philosophy of nature, of what kind of life human life is.

3.5 FINAL END

Aristotle says that eudaimonia is the final end of human life. There are some final ends which are sought both for their own sake and for the sake of something else. Everything that we pursue for its own sake - such as pleasure, knowledge, honour, and so on - we also pursue for the sake of eudaimonia. How can we pursue something both for its own sake and for the sake of eudaimonia? The solution was to distinguish between external means and constitutive means. Final ends are constitutive parts of eudaimonia. For example, we can pursue knowledge for its own sake and pursue it for the sake of living well if we understand acquiring knowledge as part of the good life. In contrast to this, Aristotle says that we never want to live well in order to achieve some other end. If there is a final end which we never seek for the sake of anything else, but only ever for its own sake, this will be a final end 'without qualification'. This is eudaimonia.

A further reason for thinking eudaimonia is our only good is that the good should be self-sufficient, i.e. it makes life desirable on its own. Eudaimonia is the most desirable thing, and we can't make it more desirable by adding something else to it. In fact, given what we've just said, to add

some other goal, e.g. knowledge, to eudaimonia is just to make that other thing part of your eudaimonia. Eudaimonia is the only self-sufficient good.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: State whether the following statements are true or false:

a) Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics contains ten books. (True/ False)

b) The word 'eudaimonia' consists of two words, namely 'eu' and 'daimon'.(True/ False)

c) For Aristotle, eudaimonia is a state of mind. (True/False)

d) For Aristotle, eudaimonia is objective. (True/False)

Q2: What is the highest end according to Aristotle?

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Q3: What are the two conditions that are to be satisfied by the highest good According to Aristotle?

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Q4: Why eudaimonia is said to be the final end of human life?

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Activity 3.1

- How is Aristotle's account of ethics related to his concept of formal cause? How do you view the relation?

Ans: .....

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3.6 EUDAIMONIA AND FUNCTION

Aristotle says that human beings can rationalize and rationality is therefore said to be the function of human beings. Function translates ergon that literally means task or work. Aristotle says that the ergon of an eye is to see-but a more general account would be the 'characteristic form of activity' of something. To say that there is a characteristic activity of something is to insight into what type of thing something is. A thing in order to fulfill its ergon, will need certain qualities. An arête, for Aristotle, is required for the fulfillment of a thing's ergon. Arête can be generally translated as an excellence, or more specifically a virtue. Just as sharpness can be said to be a virtue in a knife designed to cut something, similarly arête is said to be a virtue designed to fulfill ergon.

3.7 FUNCTION ARGUMENT

Aristotle applies the thesis of function to human beings. He says that man must have a function, because every living species has its own work or function. Human beings have many capacities-Aristotle calls them capacities of the soul, but by soul he means that in virtue of which a thing is alive. Being alive is not the distinctive characteristic of human being since 'life' is a characteristic activity of all animal. Aristotle was concerned with delineating the 'characteristic activity' only of human being. He says that reason is the only capacity of human being, because it sets man apart from other animals. He further says that the function of human being is special, because it is unique only to man. Therefore Aristotle concludes that happiness is an excellent rational activity, and he says that a good human life is one in which rational activity is well employed. In other words happiness consists in the rational activity in accordance with virtue, and if there are several virtues, in accordance with the best and the most perfect. Thus for Aristotle, the ideal function of human being is the fullest or the most perfect exercise of reason. This means that eudaimonia for a human being is the attainment of excellence (arête) in reason.

The notion of employing rationality well is not a simple one, because one must ?nd room for the good employment of the intellect on the one hand, and of the rationally responsive appetites on the other. Aristotle formulates the function (ergon) argument in the following way:

1. The good for humans is performing their functions well, if they have functions.

2. Humans have functions, and it is an activity of their soul in accordance with reason.

3. So: The good for humans is performing well this activity of their soul in accordance with reason, i.e., performing this activity of their soul in accordance with reason in conformity to the best and most complete excellence.

Aristotle says that only virtuous persons can achieve eudaimonia. To fulfill our ergon and live well, human beings must be guided by 'right' reasons-good or right reasons and not bad reason. That is, eudaimonia consists in the activity of the soul which exhibits the virtues by being in accordance with ('good' or 'right') reason (orthos logos). In other words, eudaimonia involves activity, exhibiting virtue in accordance with reason. He insists that eudaimonia is not only good character but it is a rational activity.

Aristotle's bases eudaimonia on virtue, and therefore his ethical theory is said to be eudaimonistic. However, he says that virtue is necessary but not sufficient for eudaimonia, because while emphasizing the rational aspect of the psyche, he gave importance on the importance of external good such as friends, wealth and power etc.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5: State whether the following statements are true or false:

a) The literal meaning of the word 'ergon' is task or work. (True/ False)

b) The meaning of the word arête is excellence.(True/ False)

c) For Aristotle, eudaimonia for a human being is the attainment of excellence (arête) in reason. (True/False)

d) Aristotle did not base his ethics on eudaimonia. (True/False)

Q6: Why according to Aristotle reason is said to be the characteristic activity only of human being?

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Q7: What is the core point of Aristotle's function argument ?

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Q8: What does happiness (eudaimonia) consist in according to Aristotle?

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Activity 3.2

- Do you think that man can live only by way of rationalizing? If so, why and how?

Ans: .....

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3.8 VIRTUES AND THE TRAITS OF CHARACTER

According to Aristotle, a virtue (arête) is a trait of mind or character that helps us achieve a good life, which Aristotle argues is a life in accordance with reason. There are two types of virtue - intellectual virtues and moral virtues. In Nicomachean Ethics, Book 2, Aristotle concentrates on moral virtues, traits of character.

According to Aristotle, anything that is part of the soul (the mind) is either passion, a faculty or a state (trait) of character. Since virtues are part of the soul, they must be one of these.

1. Passions: By the term 'passions' Aristotle means our bodily appetites (for food, drink, sex, etc.), our emotions, and any feelings accompanied by pleasure or pain. But these can't be virtues for three reasons.

a. Just having a particular passion - feeling hungry or angry - doesn't make you a good or bad person.

b. We generally do not choose passions, but virtues are associated with our choices. We cannot generally, just by an act of will, choose what we feel or want.

c. Virtues concern how we are disposed to feel and act; they are not desires that actually motivate us.

2. Faculties: faculties are things like sight or the ability to feel fear. Virtues can't be these, since we have these naturally but we have to acquire virtue.

3. So Aristotle comes to the conclusion that virtues must be states of character.

Aristotle defines states of character as 'the things in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to the passions'. Character involves a person's dispositions that relate to what, in different circumstances, they feel, how they think, how they react, the sorts of choices they make, and the

actions they perform. What we find pleasant also reveals our character. Character has a certain stability and longevity. Character traits last much longer and change less easily than many 'states of mind', such as moods and desires. But character can change, and so it is less stable and long-lived than personal identity. Yet it is central to being the person one is.

3.9 THE DOCTRINE OF THE MEAN

At this point one question arises-- what kind of state of character is called a virtue? Some traits of character, such as being short-tempered may stop us from leading a good life - this is a vice. On the other hand, there are some traits of character, such as being kind or courageous, help us to lead a good life - and these are the virtues. Virtue is a disposition, not a feeling or a faculty. Feelings are not the subject of praise or blame, but virtues and vices are. Again, while feelings move us to act in a certain way, virtues dispose us to act in a certain way. Virtue is a disposition to behave in the right way.

We are now in a position to define human virtue. Human virtue is defined as a disposition to behave in the right manner and as a mean between extremes of deficiency and excess, which are vices. What does this involve? Aristotle compares living well with other activities, such as eating well or physical training. In these cases, the good nutritionist needs to avoid prescribing too much food or exercise or too little. We achieve health and physical fitness by following an 'intermediate' course of action. This intermediacy is to be understood in the sense of the characterization of the intermediate as what is best, and as doing and feeling 'at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way'. This is Aristotle's 'doctrine of the mean'. Doctrine of mean therefore is a mean between two extremes, e.g., we may have passions either for 'too much' or 'too little'. Virtue involves being disposed to feeling in an 'intermediate' way, neither too much nor too little. It is important to note that Aristotle's doctrine of the mean does not claim that when we get angry, we should only ever be 'moderately' angry. We

should be as angry as the situation demands, which can be very angry or only slightly irritated. Given the very close connection between what we feel and how we choose to act, virtues are dispositions of choice as well, and there is a 'mean' for actions as well as for feelings.

Aristotle proposes practical wisdom as a helping virtue us to know how to choose a mean. For Aristotle, practical wisdom is a virtue of reason, the main intellectual virtue concerned with living. Our passions are to be tested by reason, because there can be right and wrong ways to feel passions, and the right way to feel passions is determined by reason. If we feel our passions 'irrationally' - at the wrong times, towards the wrong objects, etc. - then we don't live well. So, Aristotle concludes, a virtue is 'a state of character concerned with choice, lying in the mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the person of practical wisdom would determine it'.

Aristotle proposes three criteria to distinguish virtuous people from people who behave in the right way by accident: first, virtuous people know that they are behaving in the right way; second, they choose to behave in the right way for the sake of being virtuous; and third, their behavior manifests itself as part of a fixed, virtuous disposition.

In Book II of Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle argues that learning virtue is a matter of habit and proper training. We do not become courageous by learning why courage is preferable to cowardice or rashness, but rather by being trained to be courageous. Only when we have learned to be instinctively courageous can we rightly arrive at any reasoned approval of courage.

3.10 EUDAIMONIA AND PHILOSOPHY

In the second half of Book ten of Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle returns to the question of what eudaimonia is.

Aristotle in book six of Nicomachean Ethics divides reason into two

types: practical reason and theoretical reason. Virtue, which is necessary for eudaimonia, is impossible without practical reason, so practical reason is necessary for eudaimonia. Besides practical reason, Aristotle talks about another reason, that is, theoretical reason.

Aristotle argues that theoretical reason - the contemplation of truth - is what is 'highest' about human beings. Animals have a form of practical wisdom, in that they consider and act on what is best for themselves. But they do not contemplate general truths. Eudaimonia includes excellent activity of theoretical reason, which is philosophy. Aristotle says that the act of contemplation is a must for human beings for the following reasons:

1. This activity of contemplation is the best activity, because theoretical reason is the best thing in us and with it, we contemplate what is best (the greatest, most wonderful and most divine things in the universe), not merely what is best for us (as in practical wisdom).

2. We are able to undertake this activity more continuously than any other activity, so it leads to the most continuously happy life.

3. It is the most pleasant activity - at least, its pleasures are most pure and enduring, unlike pleasures of the body.

4. It is the most self-sufficient activity. Nothing further arises from it (it is knowledge for its own sake), while in other virtuous activities, we normally gain something (honour, gratitude, friendship, power, etc.) beyond doing the action.

5. We are active in order to have leisure. 'Leisure' is undertaking those activities we wish to undertake. The virtues of politics aim at creating space for leisure, just as we only undertake war in order to achieve peace. They serve the activity of reason.

6. Finally, theoretical reason is what we most are, it is our characteristic activity.

7. Therefore, the best and most pleasant life for us, given our nature, will be a life of reason. The life of the philosopher (or more generally, a life dedicated to knowledge) will be the best life.

Aristotle concludes Nicomachean Ethics saying that we should strive to live such a life of theoretical reasoning as far as possible, to live in accordance with the best thing in us. But we are human, and require more than this. Hence the life of virtue more broadly is also part of eudaimonia, as he has argued all along. Having passions, having a body, living with others - these are all characteristically human too. Furthermore, the life of virtue doesn't require a great deal of external goods, and so while these are necessary, they are not central.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q9: State whether the following statements are true or false:

a) According to Aristotle, virtue is passion. (True/ False)

b) There are two types of reason according to Aristotle. (True/ False)

c) For Aristotle, virtue is a disposition to behave in the right way. (True/False)

d) Aristotle threaded a golden mean between two excesses. (True/ False)

Q10: What is the difference between character and states of character according to Aristotle?

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Q11: What are the three criteria proposed by Aristotle to distinguish virtuous people from peple who behave in the right way by accident?

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Q12: Why according to Aristotle act of contemplation is the best human activity?

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3.11 LET US SUM UP

- Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics chiefly deals with the guiding question: what is the best thing for a human being? Aristotle says that it is man by virtue of his nature that he/she seeks: eudaimonia (happiness).
- Etymologically, eudaimonia consists of two words, namely, "eu" ("good") and "daimon" ("spirit").
- Eudaimonia cannot be understood in the ordinary sense of happiness, because

1. Eudaimonia is not a psychological state.
2. Eudaimonia is not subjective, it is objective.
3. Eudaimonia is stable.

- Aristotle says that eudaimonia satis?es two conditions which the supreme good must satisfy, ?rst that it is sought for its own sake and secondly that it is by itself su?cient to make life "choice worthy and lacking nothing".
- A further reason for thinking according to Aristotle is that eudaimonia is our only good which is self-sufficient, i.e. it makes life desirable on its own. Eudaimonia is the most desirable thing, and we can't make it more desirable by adding something else to it.
- Aristotle while propagating eudaimonia applied an argument called function argument to show that rationalizing is the distinctive function of human beings. Aristotle concludes that happiness is an excellent rational activity, and he says that a good human life is one in which rational activity is well employed. In other words happiness consists in the rational activity in accordance with virtue, and if there are several virtues, in accordance with the best and the most perfect. Thus for Aristotle, the ideal function of human being is the fullest or the most perfect exercise of reason. This means that eudaimonia for a human being is the attainment of excellence (arête) in reason.

- Aristotle's bases eudaimonia on virtue, and therefore his ethical theory is said to be eudaimonistic. However, he says that virtue is necessary but not sufficient for eudaimonia, because while emphasizing the rational aspect of the psyche, he gave importance on the importance of external good such as friends, wealth and power etc.

- According to Aristotle, a virtue (arête) is a trait of mind or character that helps us achieve a good life, which Aristotle argues is a life in accordance with reason. There are two types of virtue - intellectual virtues and moral virtues.

- For Aristotle, virtue is a state of character. Drawing a difference between character and state of character Aristotle states states of character as 'the things in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to the passions'.

- Aristotle while dealing with the question what kind of state of character is called a virtue says that virtue is a disposition, not a feeling or a faculty. In contrast to feelings, virtues dispose us to act in a certain way. Hence, Virtue is a disposition to behave in the right way.

- Aristotle considers virtue a golden mean between two excesses.

- Aristotle distinguishes between two kinds of reason- practical reason and theoretical reason. He argues that theoretical reason - the contemplation of truth - is what is 'highest' about human beings. Animals have a form of practical wisdom, in that they consider and act on what is best for themselves. But they do not contemplate general truths. Eudaimonia includes excellent activity of theoretical reason, which is philosophy.



3.12 FURTHER READING

1) Aristotle (2009), Nicomachean Ethics, trans. David Ross, Oxford University Press, New York.

2) Hughes, J. G. (2001), Aristotle on Ethics, Routledge, New York.
3) Hursthouse, Rosalind (2001), On Virtue Ethics, Oxford University Press, New York.
4) Guthrie, W. K. C. (1990), A History of Greek Philosophy, volume VI, Cambridge University Press.
5) McEvilley, Thomas (2002), The Shape of Ancient Thought, Motilal Banarasidas.
6) Taylor, Richard (2002), An Introduction to Virtue Ethics, Amherst: Prometheus Books

3.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1: a) True, b)True, c) False, d) True.

Answer to Q No 2 : Eudaimonia is the highest end according to Aristotle.

Answer to Q No 3: Aristotle says that eudaimonia satis?es two conditions which the supreme good must satisfy, ?rst that it is sought for its own sake and secondly that it is by itself su?cient to make life "choice worthy and lacking nothing".

Answer to Q No. 4. Aristotle says that we never want to live well in order to achieve some other end. Eudaimonia is the final end which we never seek for the sake of anything else, but only ever for its own sake. Therefore eudaimonia is said to be the final end.

Answer to Q No 5: a) True, b) True, c) True, d)False.

Answer to Q No 6: Aristotle was concerned with delineating the 'characteristic activity' only of human being. He says that reason is the only capacity of human being, because it sets man apart from other animals. He further says that the function of human being is special, because it is unique only to man.

Answer to Q No 7: The following is the core point of Aristotle's function argument:

1. The good for humans is performing their functions well, if they have functions.
2. Humans have functions, and it is an activity of their soul in accordance with reason.

3. So: The good for humans is performing well this activity of their soul in accordance with reason, i.e., performing this activity of their soul in accordance with reason in conformity to the best and most complete excellence.

Answer to Q No 8: For Aristotle, happiness consists in the rational activity in accordance with virtue, and if there are several virtues, in accordance with the best and the most perfect. Thus for Aristotle, the ideal function of human being is the fullest or the most perfect exercise of reason. This means that eudaimonia for a human being is the attainment of excellence (arête) in reason.

Answer to Q No 9: a) False, b) True, c) True, d)True

Answer to Q No 10: The difference between character and states of character is that character has a certain stability and longevity. Character traits last much longer and change less easily than many 'states of mind', such as moods and desires. But character can change, and so it is less stable and long-lived than personal identity. Yet it is central to being the person one is.

Answer to Q No 11: Aristotle proposes three criteria to distinguish virtuous people from people who behave in the right way by accident: first, virtuous people know that they are behaving in the right way; second, they choose to behave in the right way for the sake of being virtuous; and third, their behavior manifests itself as part of a fixed, virtuous disposition.

Answer to Q No 12: Activity of contemplation is the best activity, because theoretical reason is the best thing in us and with it, we contemplate what is best.

3.14 MODEL QUESTIONS

A. Very short Questions

Q1: What is eudaimonia according to Aristotle?

Q2: What is the guiding question that Aristotle deals with in Nicomachean Ethics?

Q3: What is the literal meaning of the term 'eudaimonia'?

Q4: Is virtue a habit according to Aristotle?

Q5: What are the four contenders that Aristotle dismisses in his ethics of eudaimonia?

Q6: What is the meaning of the word 'arete'?

Q7: What is the meaning of the word 'ergon'?

B. Short Questions (Write in about 100-150 words)

Q1: How is eudaimonia distinguished from general happiness?

Q2: How does Aristotle differentiate between external means and constitutive means?

Q3: Why does Aristotle think that virtue is neither passion nor faculty?

Q4: Why is virtue considered as a choice by Aristotle?

Q5: Why does Aristotle say that eudaimonia includes excellent activity of theoretical reason?

C. Long Questions (Write in about 300-500 words)

Q1: How is human good related to Aristotle's eudaimonia? Explain.

Q2: Explain Aristotle's Function Argument associated with eudaimonia.

Q3: How is virtue connected with traits of character?

Q4: Explian Doctrine of the Mean as put forward by Aristotle.

Q5: What is the relation between eudaimonia and philosophy? Explain.

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