Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*

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**Beyond Platonic Ethics**

- Plato greatly expanded the Socratic doctrine of virtue.
- He classified the virtues and associated them with parts of the state and of the soul.
  - Temperance (money-makers, emotions),
  - Courage (soldiers, will),
  - Wisdom (guardians, reason),
  - Justice (harmony of the parts).
- Although there is an explanation of the virtue of justice, the other three virtues are not fully explained.
- Plato does not distinguish between the *practical* wisdom that should govern action from the *theoretical* wisdom that should govern opinion.
- Aristotle tackled these issues (and many more) in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.

**The Good**

- For Plato, what makes an action, person, or state of affairs good is that it shares in the form: the good itself.
- As we will see in the second part of the course, Aristotle rejects Platonic forms, and so must give a different account of what makes things good.
- His view is teleological: the good is the *end* toward which everything is directed.
- There is the good for:
  - The practice of crafts (production of an object or a state of an object),
  - Investigations (discovery of truths),
  - Actions (attaining what is desired),
Decisions (performing actions which will attain what is desired).

- Generally, the products of our activities are better than the activities themselves.
- Aristotle wonders whether there is an end-product which is best of all.

The Highest Good

- Aristotle gives a reason to think that there is a highest good.
- Some activities have ends which themselves are directed toward other ends.
  - Making equipment for horses serves the end of horsemanship.
  - Horsemanship serves the end of generalship.
- The higher-level ends are more choiceworthy than are the lower, since the lower ends are pursued for the sake of the higher ends.
- It would be futile to pursue ends that do not terminate in a highest end, so it seems that there should be a highest good for each specific activity.
- If there is an end toward which all activity whatsoever is directed, this would be the highest, or most choiceworthy, good.

Communitarianism

- Knowledge of the highest good would be extremely helpful in determining the best way to live.
- So it is useful to look for a science whose subject is the highest good.
- The best way to live might be determined by what is best for:
  - The individual,
  - The community.
- Aristotle is a “communitarian,” in that he claims that the good for the community is higher than that for the individual.
  - The good for the community is “finer and more divine” than that for the individual.
- The science of what is good for the community is political science.
- So the study of individual good, ethics, is useful insofar as it serves political science.
Happiness

- So what is the highest good achievable in actions?
- Everyone, educated or not, agrees that the highest good is “happiness” (eudaimonia).
- It is also agreed that being happy is the same as “living well and doing well.”
- But the agreement is only about the name: there is much disagreement about what it is to live well and do well.
  - “The many” take happiness to be something “obvious and evident”:
    * Pleasure,
    * Wealth,
    * Honor.
  - Some among the educated (presumably Plato) take it that all of these goods are caused to be good by something that is good in its own right.
- Those in the best position to settle the issue are those with the best upbringing.

Three Kinds of Life

- Roughly speaking, there are three kinds of life that are thought to be “the good life.”
  - Of gratification (favored mainly by the many),
  - Of political activity (favored by the cultivated),
  - Of study (favored by the scholarly).
- Aristotle rejects the first two kinds as characteristic of “the good life.”
  - The life of gratification is no better than the life of a non-human animal,
  - The life of political activity aims at either:
    * Honors, which is insecure because it depends on the actions of others,
    * Virtue, which is compatible with a life of hardship.
- The life of study is “the good life,” but it will be treated later.
Critique of Plato’s Theory

- Aristotle finds it uncomfortable to criticize Plato’s theory of the good, as Plato was his friend, but he must do so in the interests of truth.

- There is no common idea of good which covers both ways we understand it:
  - As substance, “the good,”
  - As quality, “is good,”
  - As relative, “is useful for.”

- If there were a single thing that makes all things good, there would be a single science of what is good.

- But there are many sciences of subordinate goods.
  - Medicine studies the means to health, which is a good.

- It seems pointless to seek a science of what is “good in its own right,” since knowledge of this plays no role in the sciences of the subordinate goods.

The End is Happiness

- The good of any activity is that for the sake of which it is undertaken:
  - Health, in medicine,
  - Victory, in generalship.

- Unlike any subordinate goods, a highest good is one that is complete.

- If only one good is complete, then this is the highest good.

- Only an end pursued in its own right is complete.

- Happiness is the only human good pursued in its own right.

- So only happiness is complete, and therefore only happiness is the highest good for human beings.

- Honor, pleasure, understanding are all chosen for the sake of happiness.
**Human Function and Human Good**

- To understand happiness better, we need to understand what the good is for humans as humans.
- The distinctively human function is for the soul to act in ways that involve reason.
  - Obeying reasons,
  - Reasoning.
- The function of an excellent person is to use reason “well and finely.”
- A function is carried out excellently according to the virtue of that function.
- So, the good of human beings is the rational activity of the soul in accord with the best and most complete virtue.
- Moreover, this activity must be carried out over a considerable period of time.

**Happiness**

- There are many accounts of what happiness is:
  - Virtue,
  - Prudence,
  - Wisdom,
  - One or more of the above, with the addition of pleasure,
  - Any of the above, with the addition of external prosperity.
- Living virtuously, prudently, and wisely brings pleasure with it, so it need not be added.
- Happiness is the:
  - Best,
  - Finest,
  - Most pleasurable.
- But it also requires external goods, since:
  - Fine actions require resources,
  - Deficiencies lead to unhappiness.
The Source of Happiness

- There are several views about the source of happiness:
  - Some form of cultivation:
    - Learning,
    - Habituation.
  - Divine fate,
  - Luck.
- Cultivation is the best means to happiness.
- It allows happiness to be accessible to anyone (with means).
- It conforms to the claim that political science is the science of human good, since the state is in a position to promote the cultivation of virtue.

The Ups and Downs of Life

- A person’s happiness is to be measured by the course of his lifetime.
- It applies to the person while alive, not when dead.
- Minor ups and downs of fortune do not affect a person’s overall happiness.
  - The main factor is virtue, which is stable.
- A person can lose a good deal of happiness due to external misfortune.
  - But even then, when one has virtue, one will never be miserable.
- The most blessed person is one who has, and will keep, the goods required for maximal happiness.

The Virtues

- The political scientist must study the soul in order to understand virtue.
- The soul is divided into two parts:
  - The non-rational,
  - The rational.
- The virtues of the non-rational part of the soul are not distinctively human.
- The rational soul functions in two ways:
– It listens to and obeys reason (as with parental advice),
– It reasons actively (as with mathematical proof).

• Correspondingly, there are two kinds of virtue:
  – Virtues of character (generosity, temperance),
  – Virtues of thought (wisdom, comprehension, prudence).

**Virtues of Character**

• Virtues of character are the “ethical” virtues.
• They are the product of habit, while virtue of thought arises from teaching.
• They do not arise in us naturally, but require repetitive training of the kind one gets in learning a craft.
• It is all-important to develop these habits from youth.
• Excess in either direction is detrimental to the development of virtue.
  – Someone who never stands firm becomes cowardly,
  – Someone who fears nothing becomes rash.
• One develops the habit of standing firm by actually doing so, and the more accustomed he is to doing this, the more he will do so in the future.

**Pleasure and Pain**

• Pleasure and pain can be a help or a hindrance to virtue.
  – One finds it painful to abstain from excessive drinking.
• Correct education will enable us to feel pleasure and pain appropriately for action.
  – The temperate person will feel pleasure in abstinence.
• Because of the bad effect of pleasure and pain on human behavior, some have held that virtue is not being affected by them.
• But the correct response is that the virtuous person is affected by pleasure and pain in the right way.
• “Virtue is about pleasures and pains.”
Character and Action

- Virtuous actions are to be understood in terms of what a virtuous person would do.
- A just action, for example, is an action that would be carried out by a just person.
- But virtuous character is the result of the performance of virtuous actions.
- These actions put the person into the right state to perform other virtuous actions.
- There are three conditions necessary for virtuous action:
  - Knowing that the action is virtuous,
  - Deciding to do the action because it is virtuous,
  - Making the decision on the basis of “a firm and unchanging state.”

The Mean

- Virtue is a state of a person, but what kind of state?
- In nature, craft, and science, a good product is one that is not excessive in any way.
- Because it is superior to these things, a virtuous state is one that produces moderate results.
- “It is a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency.”
- In one sense, though, virtue is an extreme—an extreme of goodness of one’s state and one’s results.

The Individual Virtues

- Courage is the mean between feelings of fear and of confidence.
- Temperance is the mean between pains and pleasures.
- There are two virtues which are means between wastefulness and stinginess:
  - Generosity, where small matters are concerned (giving to charity),
  - Magnificence, where large matters are concerned (endowing an institute to study disease).
- Other virtues of character are described as means between extremes.
- It remains to describe virtues of thought and justice as a virtue.
Virtue and Practical Reason

• Now that the virtues of character have been explained, we may turn to their role in human action.

• The link is through decisions to act.

• Decisions are the outcome of rational deliberation.

• Rational deliberation is practical reasoning.
  – We deliberate about the practical means whereby we can bring about our ends.

• The ends for which we act are what we think to be good for us.

• Virtues of character allow a person to recognize what really is good.

• The good is then adopted as the end whose means are the subjects of rational deliberation.

Can Virtuous Acts Be Praised?

• An action is voluntary to the extent that neither it nor its end is forced upon the agent.

• We praise or blame a person for acting only if the action is voluntary.

• If the person has chosen the means by rational deliberation, then to that extent the action is voluntary.

• If the end is determined by one’s virtuous character, it might seem to be involuntary.

• But the virtuous character of the agent is acquired willingly, through cultivation of habit.

• So, deliberative action from a virtuous character is voluntary, and virtuous acts can be praised.

Justice

• If justice is a virtue of character, it is a state of a soul which aims at the mean between extremes.

• Just people are lawful and fair, so acting lawfully and fairly should promote some mean.
• The extremes are:
  – What is good, without regard to the individual,
  – What is bad, without regard to the individual.

• Acting lawfully and fairly promotes the mean, which is what is good for the agent.
  – Wealth is unconditionally good, but it is not good for me if I gain it by theft.

• Correctly established law will promote other virtues, so justice is the supreme virtue.

• Justice is also complete because, unlike the other virtues, it is directed toward other people.

Virtues of Thought

• Having completed his discussion of the virtues of character, Aristotle turns to the virtues of thought.

• There are two virtues of thought:
  – Prudence (rationally acquired true beliefs concerning contingent facts about what is good for us),
  – Wisdom (theoretical knowledge of necessary truths).

• It may seem that prudence and wisdom are of no use to one who is already clever.

• But the two virtues are productive:
  – Prudence elevates the natural virtue of cleverness to “full virtue,” by directing it to the good.
  – Wisdom produces happiness.

• Socrates was correct in saying that all virtues require prudence, but wrong in saying they are all instances of prudence.

A Life of Study or a Life of Action?

• A life of study is superior to a life of action.

• The reason for the superiority of study is that study is an end in itself, while action is aimed at a further end.

• Study is also the most characteristically human function, one not shared with animals.
• On the other hand, it is shared with the divine beings, whose activity consists entirely of contemplation.

• Since the life of the scholar is both the most human and partakes of the divine, it is the happiest life.

• Persons of action can attain a secondary degree of happiness if they possess the virtues of character.

• Because of the superiority of study to action, wisdom would be a virtue superior to prudence.

Virtue and Political Science

• A good society will enact laws which promote the development of virtue in individuals.

• As noted above, virtue is developed by habituation, and the process begins in the home.

• The laws should promote the continuation of the process of habituation after the individual leaves the home.

• If the laws are to be effective, they must be based on political science.

• The Sophists teach only how to be successful politically, and so their teaching does not promote good legislation.

• Political science will examine two things:
  – Existing political theory,
  – The successes and failures of past and present political institutions.