Nichomachean Ethics

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The Highest Good

- The good is that at which everything aims
  - Crafts, investigations, actions, decisions
- If one science is subordinate to another, the ends of the higher science are more choiceworthy than those of the lower
- We do not choose everything for the sake of something else
- So, there is a highest end which is the most worthy of our choice: the highest good
Political Science

- All our actions should be directed at the highest good
- Knowledge of the highest good is political science
- Political science is the ruling science
  - It prescribes the educational curriculum
  - The most honored capacities are subordinate to it
  - It legislates what must be done and avoided through its control of the other sciences concerned with action
- The good of the city is higher than that of the individual
Studying Political Science

- Political science is inexact
- It is best left to those experienced in acting
- There are various common opinions about the good that is the aim of political science
  - Happiness: living well and doing well
    - According to those with changing opinions, it is pleasure, wealth, or honor
    - According to the wise, it is something good in itself
- The best people to determine what happiness is are those who had a fine upbringing
The Best Life

- There are three conceptions of happiness, based on the lives people lead
  - The vulgar many lead a life of gratification and identify happiness with pleasure
    - Such a life is fit only for animals
  - The cultivated lead an active life and identify happiness with honor
    - Honor is secondary to goodness
  - The studious have another conception
The End

- The good is that for the sake of which something is undertaken
- The ends of actions are its the goods
- Some goods are for the sake of other goods
- An end pursued in itself is the only one complete without reservation
- Happiness is the only complete end
  - Honor, pleasure, understanding are chosen for the sake of happiness
Human Function

- Action on the part of the soul that expresses reason is distinctive of human beings
- The excellent man’s function is to express reason well
- A function is completed well when it is exercised excellently (virtuously)
- So, the human good is the soul’s activity that expresses virtue
Goods

- Goods are divided into three types
  - External
  - Goods of the soul
  - Goods of the body
- Goods of the soul are considered goods to the fullest extent for a human being
- This conforms to the account of the good as the virtue of the soul’s activity
The Happy Life

- The happy life is commonly agreed to be
  - The best life
  - The finest life
  - The most pleasant life
- The virtuous life is all of these
- Virtue is pleasant in itself and pleases the best persons and those who love what is fine
- But external goods are also needed for happiness
- Neither prosperity nor virtue is all of happiness
The Origin of Happiness

- Happiness may have one of several origins
  - Divine fate
  - Fortune
  - Learning or other cultivation
- Learning is the best way to happiness
- It is natural for us to be equipped to learn how to be happy
- It also vindicates the central role of political science, which can allow learning to be cultivated
- Happiness requires a complete life
Virtue

- The virtue of the nutritive part of the human soul is shared with all living beings and is not specifically connected with reason
- The virtues of character pertaining to the appetitive part of the soul are the result of obedience to reason
  - Courage
  - Temperance
- The virtues of thought are peculiarly human
  - Wisdom
  - Intelligence
Virtues of Character

- Virtues of character are acquired by habit.
- They do not arise in us naturally, but require repetitive training, just as in learning a craft.
- An inexact account of this is given:
  - Character virtues tend to be ruined by excess:
    - Timidity vs. rashness
  - There is a feedback loop: standing firm makes us brave, and being brave helps us stand firm.
Pleasure and Pain

- Pleasure and pain are signs of character virtues
  - A temperate man enjoys abstinence itself
- Virtues of character are concerned with pleasure and pain
  - They can direct us away from virtue
  - All actions concern pleasure and pain
  - We estimate our actions by pleasure and pain
  - It is hard to fight pleasure
A Puzzle

- It is paradoxical to demand that we become virtuous by performing virtuous actions.
- One performs musical actions only when already musical, and so for other crafts.
- But this might happen from chance, so to be musical we must produce actions the way a musical person would.
Solution

• Whether a musical sound is produced well is based on the sound itself
• This is not so for virtues
• The agent must be in the right state to produce an action well (virtuously)
  – Know he is performing a virtuous action
  – Decide on the virtuous action
  – Decide on the action from a firm and unchanging state
• These conditions can be met only if one does things the way a virtuous person does
The Genus of Virtue

- Virtue must be one of three conditions arising in the soul
  - Feelings (what implies pleasure and pain)
  - Capacities (e.g., being capable of a feeling)
  - States (what we have when we have feelings)

- Virtues are not feelings or capacities, since those two are not objects of praise or blame, nor are they the product of decisions

- Virtues of character must be states of the soul
The Mean

- Virtues cause the possessor to be in a good state and perform his functions well.
- A science produces its product well when it pursues the intermediate between extremes.
- Virtues of character aim at the mean between extremes of feelings (e.g., rashness and timidity).
- Virtue is, however, an extremity, in that it is the best condition of the soul.
- Other extremities can never be virtues (e.g., envy).
Individual Virtues

- Courage is the mean between feelings of fear and confidence
- Temperance is the mean between pains and pleasures
- There is a mean between wastefulness and stinginess
  - In small matters, this is generosity
  - In large matters, this is magnificence
- Numerous other virtues are enunciated
- Justice has not yet been treated
Voluntary Feelings and Actions

- Virtue pertains only to voluntary feelings and actions
  - We pardon what is done involuntarily
- What is forced by something external is involuntary
- What is forced by circumstances is mixed
  - It is done willingly
  - It is not something the person would choose
- It is sometimes hard to determine what to do
Ignorance

- Actions caused by ignorance are involuntary
  - One does not know the particulars surrounding the action, most importantly:
    - What one is doing it to
    - What the result will be
- This is seemingly different from actions done in ignorance (as when one is drunk)
  - One does not know what is right or wrong
Decision

- Decision is voluntary but not identical to being voluntary
  - Children and the other animals act voluntarily but do not make decisions
- Decision is not appetite, emotion, wish, or belief
- Decision is associated with reason and thought
Deliberation

- Decision is the outcome of rational deliberation
- We deliberate about what is up to us
- Deliberation occurs when it is unclear which action should be undertaken
- We deliberate about the means by which we may bring about our ends
We wish for an end, whose achievement is the goal of deliberation.

The good is not identical to what is wished, since one can wish incorrectly.

The apparent good is not identical to what is wished, since then nothing would be good by nature.

The excellent person wishes the real good, while the base person wishes the apparent good.
Virtue and Character

- If a person’s wishes follow from his character, they seem to be involuntary
- But we praise and blame people for what they wish
- Character is acquired willingly (though it might not be shed willingly)
- So people are responsible for their ends
- Actions and states are not voluntary in the same way
Justice

- “What sorts of actions are [justice and injustice] concerned with?”
- “What sort of mean is justice?”
- “What are the extremes between which justice is intermediate?”
- Justice and injustice are states which make us do just and unjust acts, respectively
Justice and the Good

- Lawful and fair persons are just, and unlawful and unfair persons are unjust
- An unjust person is greedy, pursuing what is unconditionally good but not good for that person
- We should instead pursue only what is good to have in our circumstances
- For example, wealth is good, but it is not good for me if I gain it through theft
Justice and Virtue

• The law aims at benefit
• Since the law is just, justice produces and maintains happiness in the political community
• It instructs us to act virtuously (e.g., courageously)
• This is why justice is considered the supreme virtue
• It is also exercise of complete virtue, since it enables us to exercise virtue on others as well as on ourselves
Virtues of Thought

- Human reasoning is divided into two parts
  - Scientific reasoning
  - Rationally calculating
- The best state of each is its virtue
- The excellence of scientific thought is truth
- The excellence of calculating thought is a decision whose reason is true and whose end is correct
Wisdom and Intelligence

- Wisdom and intelligence are two virtues of human thought
- Wisdom concerns scientific knowledge, i.e. knowledge of necessary truths
- It has no place for deliberation
- Intelligence concerns calculating the truth about what is good or bad for a human being
- Intelligence is served by temperance
Puzzles

- Of what value are wisdom and intelligence?
  - Wisdom does not produce anything
  - Intelligence is of no use if we are already good, and if not, we can take the advice of others
- Both intelligence and wisdom are choice-worthy in themselves
- Wisdom makes us happy
- Intelligence makes sure that the decisions that promote our goals are correct
Natural and Full Virtue

• Cleverness is a natural virtue
• It is able to carry out the actions that fulfill the goals we have
• But intelligence is full virtue, because it provides the goals themselves
• Socrates was correct in seeing that intelligence is necessary for virtue
• But he was incorrect in thinking that all virtues are instances of intelligence
The Unity of the Virtues

- Some say that one who is naturally suited to one virtue can have it without the others
- But while this holds for natural virtues, it does not hold for full virtues
- Intelligence is necessary and sufficient for all virtues
- “Virtue makes us reach the end in our actions, while intelligence makes us reach what promotes the end”
Continence and Incontinence

- Incontinence (lack of self-control), like vice and bestiality, is a condition of character to be avoided
- It seems that the continent person is one who acts on the basis of rational calculation
- The incontinent person would be one who acts on the basis of feelings and appetites
- It is not clear how continence is related to temperance, intelligence, emotion, honor, and gain
Incontinence and Ignorance

- Socrates held that one cannot be incontinent if one knows what the good is.
- Aristotle allows that one can be incontinent while knowing what the good is.
- Incontinence arises when appetite leads us to act in a particular case against a universal belief.
- Belief that this is sweet and that what is sweet is pleasant leads to a desire to taste the sweet thing.
Friendship

- Friendship either is or involves virtue
- It is most necessary for our lives
  - No one would choose to be without friends
  - Even rich people need friends upon whom to bestow their beneficence
  - Friends are needed to guard prosperity and to provide refuge in poverty
  - People as well as animals naturally are friendly with one another
  - The justice that is most just seems to belong to it
Puzzles about Friendship

- Some puzzles about friendship are to be solved through theoretical science
  - Is the basis of friendship to be found in similarity or in difference?
- Other puzzles concern human nature and bear on character and feeling
  - Can anyone be friends, or can the vicious not be friends?
  - How many species of friendship are there?
Love

- We can learn about friendship by understanding the nature of love
- Love has three causes
  - What appears good
  - What is appears pleasant
  - What appears useful
- Things need not be unconditionally good, pleasant, or useful in order to be loved
The Conditions of Friendship

- Love requires three conditions to be called friendship
  - The friend must have a soul and be someone for whom you have goodwill, i.e., wish goods for his own sake
  - The friend must reciprocate this good will
  - The friend must be aware of the reciprocated good will

- The “goods” in question are the good, the pleasant, or the useful
Species of Friendship

- The species of love and friendship correspond to the three causes of love
- Friendships based on utility or pleasantness are only coincidental and easily dissolved
  - The friend is not loved for who he is
  - Usefulness and pleasantness come and go
- Complete friendship, which is rare, is based on wishing the good for others
  - It is the friendship of good people similar in virtue
Pleasure

- Pleasant amusements seem to be ends in themselves, like happiness
- But it is absurd to think that our life-long work is aimed at pleasant amusements
  - We amuse ourselves instead to prepare ourselves for activity
  - The virtuous life involves serious actions
  - The base share in pleasure but not happiness
Theoretical Study

- Happiness is activity that expresses virtue
- It should express the virtue for the best thing
- The best thing is the divine
- The activity of the divine being is theoretical study
- Theoretical study is also pleasurable and self-sufficient
Study vs. Action

- By contrast, action in politics and war is directed at something else
  - War is directed at gaining peace
  - Politics is directed at power and honors
- The activity of study has no end beyond itself
- The best life is a long one full of study, developing the understanding
- It is lived by humans only insofar as they have a divine aspect to them
The Character Virtues

- The life of the character virtues is happiest in a secondary way
- It is closely tied to intellectual virtue as well as to feelings
- It requires external goods more so than does intellectual virtue (e.g., money for generosity)
- The actions of the gods should be described as study, and they love the wise person the best
- But the other animals do not study, and so should not be said to be happy
Moral Education

- The aim of studies about action is to enable us to act
- So how should we try to make people virtuous?
- Arguments alone do not motivate people to act virtuously
  - The many are motivated by fear of pain and do not know what is truly pleasant
- The soul of the student must be prepared by habits of appreciating what is virtuous
The Law

- Young people who have been brought up in the home may develop habits needed for their virtue
- The correct laws are needed to continue this process after they have left home
- Law has the power to compel behavior, even in the home
- Law is reason proceeding from intelligence
Legislative Science

- The laws that encourage virtue must be correctly formulated
- They will incorporate what is best universally, though perhaps not for each individual
- Correct laws are best made through legislative science
- But sophists, who are not teaching from experience or knowledge of the best, teach politics
- We need to re-examine from the beginning existing political theory and the successes and failures of political institutions