

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.