



Nicomachean Ethics

Philosophy 21
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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

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 seems 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