

Plato and Aristotle Study Guide

LART602

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Readings:

Plato: *Republic*, Books II-V (*Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, pp. 398-507)¹

Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics* Books I-II (*Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, pp. 870-890)²

Burkert: "Philosophical Religion" pp. 329-337

General Notes

- Aristotle was a student of Plato and taught in Plato's Academy for twenty years; after Plato's death, Aristotle founded his own school, the Lyceum, near Athens. Aristotle was from Stagira, in Macedonia (northern Greece). Political events twice forced Aristotle to flee Athens. For a time, Aristotle was a tutor to Alexander the Great.
- Aristotle spawned a philosophical system that is second perhaps only to that of Plato. He established methods in logic and science that remain in place today, including the general system of biological taxonomy (in terms of genus and species, etc.). His account of the physical world and of the motions and nature of the heavens remained influential until displaced by the scientific revolution in the 17th Century C.E.
- Aristotle's method is generally *empiricist* where Plato's is generally *rationalist*.³ That is, Aristotle tends to gather empirical information and then formulate general principles to accommodate it, while Plato tends to proceed by the analysis of concepts, consulting empirical information only afterwards as a means of dis/confirming the resulting position.
- In some respects Aristotle's account is reminiscent of Platonism, but for the most part, he affirms the reality of the material world as basic. The principles of rational order that Aristotle sees are embedded in the natural world about us, not distinct from it. In this respect, Aristotle's account is similar to that of the naturalistic Pre-Socratics.

Some General Questions

1. As always, think about the extent to which, or ways in which, the philosopher thinks of our world as a rational cosmos, if at all.
2. To what extent, if any, does Plato approach the notion of "universal" or "maximal" cosmos – i.e., the notion that every feature of reality, and of human affairs in particular, involves some form of rational order? To what extent, if any, does Plato depart from or fall short of this notion?
3. How do the methods of Plato and Aristotle differ, if at all?
4. To what extent are the worlds conceived by Plato and Aristotle alike, and to what extent are they different?
5. To what extent, if any, does Aristotle approach the notion of "universal" or "maximal" cosmos – i.e., the notion that every feature of reality, and of human affairs in particular, involves some form of rational order? To what extent, if any, does Aristotle depart from or fall short of this notion?

Note:

- Underlined sections below will be of particular significance for our discussion.
- If you're reading from *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, you can take advantage of the editors' introductory notes to each Book; these are helpful in orienting you to the discussion to come.

Plato, *Republic* Book II

- 357a-367e (pp. 398-407): Not satisfied with the account of Book I, Socrates' interlocutors, Glaucon and Adeimantus, challenge Socrates to provide a more complete demonstration of the prudential value of morality ("justice"); this Socrates agrees to do.
- 368c-376c (pp. 407-416): Beginning construction of the *kallipolis*, the ideal city (socio-political organization). Socrates reasons that it will be easier to "find" justice if we look at a "larger model" of something that is just, namely, the ideal city. Once we find justice in the ideal city, we will be able to identify it in the individual, and thus, perhaps, determine why it is that we should strive to develop a just character. Pay particular attention here to the general organization and structure of the city, its classes, and why each must exist and perform its given task. Question: why must the "guardian" class be philosophical?
- 376c-end Book II (pp. 416-423): Beginning account of the education of the guardians. This section will give you a good, preliminary picture of the sort of state Plato has in mind. Note in particular the treatment of religious myth and, famously, of the poets.

***Republic* Book III**

- 386a-411e (pp. 424-450): Continued development of educational principles, with interesting comments on mourning, laughter, theater, music, love, diet, and healthcare. Note the fate of irremediables at 410a.
- 412a-end Book III (pp. 450-455): In this section, Plato asserts the need for a ruling class and identifies the key attributes of those who are to rule the ideal city. Note the distinction drawn within the guardian class between "auxiliaries" and "complete guardians." Note the "noble falsehood," a myth about the essential nature of the members of the city's classes. Note the living arrangements of the guardians.

***Republic* Book IV**

- 419a-421c (pp. 456-458): Note here the important point made about the happiness of the citizens of the *kallipolis*.
- 427d-434c (pp. 459-471): Plato's account of civic justice (justice as a property of the city), including his account of the other civic virtues, moderation, courage, and wisdom. Note the definitions of these virtues and the structural definition of justice in particular. Note the effect of justice on the city as a whole, and the effect of injustice.
- 435b-441c (pp. 471-477): Plato here argues that the human soul (*psuche*) has the same "parts" as the ideal city. This argument is important if Plato is to argue that justice, as defined in terms of the city, is the same kind of thing in terms of the human individual.
- 441c-445b (477-481): Plato's account of justice and the other cardinal virtues in the human soul. This section marks one of the key points in Plato's argument that it is prudent (beneficial to us) to be just. Note the close relationships among un/just action and the condition of being un/just.

Republic Book V

- 451c-466d (pp. 485-500): Continuation of education and living arrangements of the guardians. Some particularly interesting elements include the role of women, communal marriage and children, and infanticide.
- 466d, 471c-473b (pp. 500, 505-507): Plato here addresses the important question whether the *kallipolis* is a real possibility. This question is important because as a model of morality it must bear some clear relationship to our actual world. Think about the extent to which an idealization such as Plato's is significant for our practical lives.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I (pp. 870-883)

- Aristotle texts tend to be dense, though the organization of his thinking is plainly evident and often impressive. The density is due to our texts often being what we think were lecture notes or notes taken by his students. In this case, the text is attributed to Aristotle's son Nicomachus, taking notes at his father's lecturing.
- Chapter 1: Chapters 1-3 provide a general survey of Aristotle's topic. First, we get a general characterization of the topic to be examined, namely, the good. Aristotle distinguishes two types of good – activities and ends (products of activity). The point about subordinate ends establishes that by achieving a higher-order good we achieve whatever lower-order goods contribute to it.
- Chapter 2: This section focuses the study onto the human good. Note the statement of the relative value of public versus individual good (1094b7-11).
- Chapter 3: Here, Aristotle makes an important point about the degree of precision of which political science (i.e., ethics) admits. What is this point, and what does it tell us about his understanding of the world as a rational cosmos?
- Chapter 4: Aristotle re-states the question of what is the highest human good. The answer is happiness, by which he means "living well and doing well." Aristotle considers and rejects candidates for what leads to human happiness: pleasure, wealth, and public acclaim ("honor"). Note the need for the student to be of "fine habits", if a correct answer is to be obtained.
- Chapter 5: Further discussion of pleasure, wealth, and honor; introduction of virtue as the source of happiness.
- Chapter 7: Aristotle begins this important chapter with an analysis of happiness (the good life), which bears the features of a highest good: it is complete, self-sufficient, and choice-worthy. Aristotle then (1097b24) introduces a new approach to the question of what makes us happy, i.e., by reference to our *function*. Note, then, that where a thing has a function, we can speak of its "virtues", i.e., those qualities enabling it to perform its function well. Thus begins the search for the human virtues, those qualities enabling us to live well, which is our function.
- Chapter 8: Here, Aristotle pauses to evaluate his "sketch" of a position. Note the emphasis on our enjoying virtuous behavior, and note also the necessity for certain "external goods," if we are to live well.
- Chapter 9: Here, Aristotle addresses the question how virtue is achieved – whether by practice or by natural development. Note the point about the infamous end of Priam: the good life must end well.
- Chapter 13: Aristotle turns his attention towards an account of virtue per se. Virtue concerns the rational soul, which has one part that "listens" and one that is fully rational. Since virtues are qualities that enable well-functioning, where we have two parts of the soul involved with reason, we will have two general forms of virtue, character virtues and virtues of thought. Character virtues will be his primary subject.

Nicomachean Ethics Book II

- Chapter 1: The development of character virtues is by habituation – i.e., by practice. Thus, the importance of a good up-bringing.
- Chapter 2: Here, Aristotle identifies virtue as striking a “mean” between excess and deficiency (too much and too little) of some characteristic activity. With respect to fear, for instance, too little facing (a deficiency) amounts to cowardice, while too much (an excess) amounts to rashness. Between these, the mean of courage is to be found.
- Chapter 3: Proper virtue is pleasant. Pleasure by itself, however, represents a significant threat to virtue.
- Chapter 4: Aristotle addresses the question how we can develop virtue, by practicing virtue, if we don’t yet have the virtue in the first place.
- Chapter 5: Aristotle considers the question what kind of thing virtue is, concluding that it is a state of the soul.
- Chapter 6: Chapter 6 brings together the several elements of Aristotle’s account to this point, the fullest statement of his position.

Burkert, “Philosophical Religion” pp. 329-337

- Look, here, for developments in Plato’s view of the relationship of the gods to reality and of his account of reality itself. Notice the return of attention to *this* world, the this-worldly, the role of the anthropomorphic gods and spirits, etc. Note the congruence of Greek religion to its political setting in the *polis*.

¹ Plato’s *Republic* may be found here:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0168>

² Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* may be found here:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0054>

³ See the Basic Terminology handout for a disambiguation of the term ‘rationalist’.