

Aristotle Study Guide

LART602

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Readings:

Aristotle: *Physics* Book I.1, II.1, 3-6 (required; *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, 732-33, 740-43, 745-53)¹

Physics, Book I.5-8, II.7-9 (recommended; *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, 733-39, 753-57)

Nicomachean Ethics Books I-II (*Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, 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 a young 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 our formal study of logic and our 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. Look for Aristotle first surveying and assembling information and then seeking to organize that information under general principles. Similarly, look for Aristotle searching for general principles of order in the world encountered empirically around us.
- 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. Look for signs of Aristotle's naturalism, the doctrine that the principles of order are to be found in the natural world itself. Contrast this with Plato's location of the ideal.

¹ Aristotle's *Physics* may be found here: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/physics.html>.

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

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

³ Unfortunately, we now have two uses of the term 'rationalism'. At the outset of our course, we defined rationalism in terms of logic, system, and knowledge. We might call this "big-R Rationalism". And we now have a second term (which we might call "little-r rationalism"). Within big-R Rationalism, that is, we encounter a split as between those philosophers who favor sense and those who favor reason as the primary source of human knowledge. Little-r rationalists, in this sense, are those who identify reason as the primary source of human knowledge, while empiricists are those identifying sensation as occupying this role. We thus have two forms of (big-R) Rationalism in the broader sense, where the two forms, (little-r) rationalism and empiricism differ on the interpretation of the knowability criterion, (c). Ordinarily, in this course, I will mean (big-R) Rationalism in the broader sense unless otherwise indicated.

- 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.

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. How is this rational order reflected in Aristotle's thought? Is Aristotle's world a maximally logical world?
2. To what extent are the worlds conceived by Plato and Aristotle alike, and to what extent are they different?
3. How does Aristotle conceive the role of the divine in the natural order?

Aristotle, *Physics*

- Recall our definition of a *phusis*: a principle intrinsic to a physical object or process, one defining its nature. Thus, *ta phusika*, things having such a principle, are the subject of Aristotle's treatise, here.
- Book I, Chapter 1: Aristotle expresses a general (big-R) Rationalist principle, that we seek knowledge by natural means, searching for logical principles of systematic order.
- Chapter 5: Aristotle identifies basic principles of change: change involves opposites.
- Chapter 6: Aristotle introduces the idea that some "intermediate" thing is required if change involves opposites.
- Chapter 7: Aristotle identifies a "subject" of change as distinct from the qualities the subject gains or loses in change. This distinction leads to Aristotle's matter-form distinction, where matter is the ultimate subject of change and form is what is gained or lost in change.
- Chapter 8: Aristotle here responds to the puzzle of change deriving from Parmenides: we avoid *ex nihilo* becoming if we have a third term, the subject of change, to gain or lose properties.
- Book II, Chapter 1: Aristotle draws a distinction between natural objects and those unnatural (artifacts). Natural objects have an "internal" principle (i.e., *phusis*) while in artifacts, the defining principle of a thing derives from outside it (as, for example, from a craftsman).
- Chapter 3: Aristotle introduces his four-fold distinction among "causes" (or explanations).
- Chapter 4: Aristotle identifies luck and chance as "causes". He defends both as bona fide causes.
- Chapter 5: Aristotle identifies luck as involving coincidence and being "contrary to reason."
- Chapter 6: Luck is distinguished from chance, by Aristotle, as involving the ends of intentional beings.
- Chapter 7: Aristotle here shows relationships among the four chief forms of cause.
- Chapter 8: The four causes are here integrated to the two "natures", matter and form.
- Chapter 9: Aristotle turns his attention here to necessity.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I

- This 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*.