Aristotle IV
PHIL301
Prof. Oakes
Winthrop University
updated: 11/19/12 2:14 PM

Nicomachean Ethics, Book I, Chapters 1-5, 7-9, 13, Book II, Chapters 1-6; 1094a1-1100a9, 1102a5-1107a27: *RAGP*, pp. 870-890

Method, Again

- Aristotle seems to start and restart his discussion several times. It is typical of Aristotle to give careful attention to procedure or method, and to take note of such general principles as thus become evident.
- First, in Book I, Chapters 1-3, Aristotle describes his general topic, namely, "the good" relative to humans. Along the way, he points out several general features of "goods" and of an inquiry into them.
    - For one thing, Aristotle points out that *every* human action "seems to aim at some good" (1094a2). That is, no one does anything without conceiving the goal to be "good" for something.
    - Aristotle also distinguishes different kinds of good, some of which are activities, some products of an activity, where the latter are superior to the activities producing them. (1094a3-6)
    - We see, too, that there are hierarchies of goods, so that the good end of (military) horsemanship is subordinate to that of (military) generalship. Logically, however, this hierarchy cannot be infinite, or else no good would be well-defined; this entails that there be a highest good. (1094a18-22)
    - Aristotle's note at 1094b20 is important and recurs elsewhere: moral philosophy is not an exact science. Partly this is because of the great variety in "what is fine and what is just." This makes morality a sufficiently complex matter that we must expect from its study only general principles, not specific instructions for specific situations. Cf. 1098a27, 1104a3.
- In Chapter 4, Aristotle considers what "most people" call the highest good, and considers the different beliefs of different groups about what constitutes this state, and the reliability of those beliefs.
    - First, he observes that everyone agrees that "happiness" is the highest human good, though we disagree about what makes one happy. (1095a20)
    - "The many" believe pleasure, wealth, or honor to make one happy, though these beliefs tend to be unstable, and "the wise" tend to think otherwise. (1095a23-28; see further, Chapter 5, for the shortcomings of these goods.)
    - Note at 1095b4-13 Aristotle's claim that only those who have been raised well will have reliable beliefs about happiness, a claim appearing also elsewhere. This claim is substantiated by Aristotle's discussion of virtue – see below.
- In Chapter 7, Aristotle articulates certain criteria by which the highest good may be indentified.
    - Completeness: an incomplete end is one that is not fully an end in itself – i.e., it is something that is pursued for some *further* end. Happiness is thought to be a complete end, insofar as it is not pursued for any further end, but only for itself (1097b1).

- Self-Sufficiency: "we regard something as self-sufficient when all by itself it makes a life choiceworthy and lacking nothing." (1097b14-15)
- Choiceworthiness: choiceworthiness admits of degree: a good is of greater choiceworthiness to the extent that it is (a) chosen over others and (b) thus cannot be made better by the addition of other goods. Happiness is the most choiceworthy of goods, for Aristotle, because it is chosen over all other goods, and there is no good that can be added to it, making it better. (1097b16-19)
- This completes Aristotle's general discussion of the human good. He proceeds to a discussion of *virtue*, which enables a more specific account of happiness. (This break occurs in the middle of Chapter 7, at 1097b24.)

Virtue

- The general account of the human good (happiness) provided up to 1097b24 identifies its general features, but does not indicate specifically what it is. In order to make his account more precise, Aristotle appeals to certain structural features of human being, which are informed by his prior work on causes (i.e., *Physics* II).
  - As we have seen, the *phusis* (nature) of a thing, for Aristotle, involves its matter and form, where the latter is a further complex of formal, efficient, and final causes. To know a thing is to know its causes. (See notes in **Aristotle III**. See too *Phys.* 184a10-16.)
- We may further know a thing, according to Aristotle, by reference to its *function* (*ergon*) and to its *virtue* (*arete*). See 1097b24-33.
  - The function of a thing is its "characteristic activity" by means of which it attains its end (*telos*).
  - The virtues of a thing are those qualities enabling it to perform its function well, so as to be a good instance of its kind. See also 1098a9-12.
- These principles may be illustrated in the following chart:

Object	End (*telos*)	Function (*ergon*)	Form (*eidos*)	Virtue (*arete*)
Hammer	the driven nail	striking	(those properties permitting the striking)	(those qualities optimizing striking)
Horse	being a horse (horse life)	galloping, whinnying, eating, mating, etc.	(those properties permitting horse functioning)	(those qualities optimizing horse functioning)
Human	being a human (human life)	(see below)	(those properties permitting human functioning)	(those qualities optimizing human functioning – see below)

  - In general, as above, we may define a thing by reference to its end – Aristotle is a teleologist.
  - The *function* of a thing is whatever activity it performs satisfying its end. The *form* of a thing will be those qualities enabling it to function properly. In the case of a hammer, this entails a certain size, shape, and composition, so as to permit the striking function bringing it about that nails may be driven into wood (etc.). In the case of a horse, the functions are of course more complex and varied, but their end result is that a being of a certain kind exist, namely, a horse.
  - Note that the form of a thing will also determine its material composition. See *Meteorologica* 12.IV 389b28-31, 390a2-20: in order to function properly, a thing must be composed of a certain material. I.e., a thing's end determines its function, its function determines its form, and its form includes a specification of the kind of material required for proper functioning. In the case of a hammer,

iron and wood are suitable material causes, given the hammer's end; Styrofoam, not.

- The function of living beings Aristotle discusses in terms of "souls" (*psuche*), and he identifies three basic kinds. See 1097a33-1098a3, 1102a28-1102b4.[1]
    - We may think of these various "souls" as different, general respects in which material stuff may be "animated". Note that as functions, these entail a form of a certain kind, where this will include an "efficient cause" or principle of motion. I.e., an organism's soul is an *internal principle of change*.
    - The "nutritive" soul is shared by all living things – plants, animals, and humans – and includes the organism's capacity for metabolic process and growth.
    - The "perceptual" soul comprises an organism's various capacities for sensation, and is definitive of animals, including humans.
    - The third soul is the "rational" soul and this is peculiar to humans alone.
- The virtues of a thing are those qualities enabling it to perform its function well, thus satisfying its goal in the best possible way. See 1097b25-29, 1098a8-17, 1106a17-24.
    - For the given "soul" function, a virtue will presumably be some quality optimizing the processes of metabolism, the capacities to see and hear, etc. These qualities allow us to speak of a "good liver" or, by contrast, "poor eyesight", where the given virtues are present or absent.
    - Our particular concern is of course with the human good, so Aristotle focuses on the human virtues – those qualities, that is, enabling a human to function well (as a human), resulting not simply in a human life, but in a *good* human life. Thus, whatever are the specifically human virtues, they will be those qualities making life good – i.e., leading to happiness. In this way, Aristotle will provide the more precise account of human happiness mentioned above. See 1102a13-15.

Human Virtue

- For Aristotle, it is the capacity for rational activity that defines humans as such. While we share with other organisms the nutritive and perceptual souls, it is the rational soul that distinguishes us from those other beings. Consequently, to speak of the human good – i.e., the good for humans as distinct from other kinds of being – we must refer to those virtues associated with the rational soul.
- While the human soul as a whole has the three parts specified above, it may also be divided in terms of those parts that "share in reason" and those that do not. The part of the soul that is associated with reason is itself divisible into two distinct parts. See 1102b26-1103a3.
    - Note, first of all, that the rational soul per se is the capacity for reasoning – the rational mind.
    - And while the other parts of the soul do not themselves reason, they may "listen to reason," or not, in the sense that rational thought may influence their functioning. Thus, Aristotle divides the soul into those parts that have nothing to do with reason, and those that "share" in it, in some respect or other.
    - The "plant-like" (i.e., nutritive) part of the soul is deaf to reason. I cannot by rational thought alter the way my liver functions, for example.
    - But certain aspects of the "perceptual" soul may be influenced by rational thought. For the perceptual part of the soul includes the capacity for *feeling* and *physical action*, and these may be trained by the rational mind. For example, my proclivity for fear may "listen to" what reason tells me is, in fact, dangerous.[2]

[1] Aristotle examines the concept and nature of "soul" in detail in his *De Anima*.
[2] Compare Plato, *Republic* 439e-441b.

  - Thus, we have on the one hand the part of the soul that performs reasoning activities – reason per se, the rational soul – and then we have the part of the soul that does not itself reason, but is responsive to reason.
- Given the distinctions in the parts of soul that are associated with reason, Aristotle defines two sorts of virtues peculiar to humans. See 1103a4-18.
  - Where reason itself is concerned, we have the "virtues of thought," such as "wisdom, comprehension, and intelligence." These are developed by education, primarily.
  - Those parts of the soul that listen to but do not perform reason are optimized by the "virtues of character," which include "generosity and temperance." The character virtues are developed by habituation. See 1103a32-b25. The character virtues are Aristotle's primary focus in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.
- This brings us to Aristotle's well-known account of (character[3]) virtue as a "golden mean." See 1104a12-25, 1106a27-b28, 1107a9-27.
  - Where the character virtues are optimal capacities to act or feel in ways characteristic of human life, Aristotle observes that the optimal state appears to be a mean or average state between "extremes" of "excess" and "deficit". (1104a12) Too much or too little of a given characteristic functioning, in other words, results in worse living.
  - Aristotle supplies a number of examples to illustrate this idea, including his model example, courage: if one fears too much, one becomes cowardly; if one fears too little, one becomes rash. (1104a19-21) Both cowardice and rashness are *vices* – i.e., habits tending to reduce the quality of life.
  - It is important to note that this "mean" state is not itself an act or a kind of act, nor again a feeling or kind of feeling, but a *trained capacity* to act or feel in certain ways. Specifically, it is the trained capacity to act or feel in the way most likely to contribute to a good life, where this is a matter decided by reason. See 1105b19-1106a14.
    - That is, what Aristotle calls courage is knowing when to fear and when not to fear. This state, however, is not simply an item of information that one can know intellectually. Rather, it is a condition ingrained in one's character by a long process of fearing and not-fearing, guided, presumably, by the many models, teachers, parents, friends, etc. of one's community.
  - Note, too, that Aristotle places several further conditions on the character virtues: one must find pleasure in virtuous behavior; it should be easy for one; a stable condition. See Book II, Chapters 3 and 4.
- For official definition of character virtue, see 1106b17-18 and 1107a1-4.

Anthropos Logos

- Putting it all together, we have something like the following.
- Humans, like everything else in Aristotle's world, are defined by their various "causes", including their end, form, principle of motion, and matter. The end of human life is human living – living as a human. This is best understood in terms of its ideal or optimal form, meaning the good life, or happiness, for humans, which itself is made possible by those qualities optimizing human form and function, the human virtues.

[3] Note the etymology of this term, from the Greek *karattein*, meaning to sharpen or to etch. One's character is a result of such a carving process.