Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics

ἀρετή

Areté
Virtue
Excellence
Goodness
Aristotle’s rejection of Plato’s theories:

- In this painting by Raphael, Plato (holding the Timeus) pointing up, representing the importance of focusing on the eternal Eidos, while Aristotle (carrying his Nichomachean Ethics) holds his hand out towards the earth, representing his emphasis on the reality of the material, physical world.
Aristotle was born in Stageira, Chalcidice, in 384 BC, about 55 km (34 mi) east of modern-day Thessaloniki. His father Nicomachus was the personal physician to King Amyntas of Macedon. Aristotle was trained and educated as a member of the aristocracy. At about the age of eighteen, he went to Athens to continue his education at Plato's Academy. Aristotle remained at the academy for nearly twenty years before quitting Athens in 348/47 BC. The traditional story about his departure reports that he was disappointed with the direction the academy took after control passed to Plato's nephew Speusippus upon his death, although it is possible that he feared anti-Macedonian sentiments and left before Plato had died. He then traveled with Xenocrates to the court of his friend Hermias of Atarneus in Asia Minor. While in Asia, Aristotle traveled with Theophrastus to the island of Lesbos, where together they researched the botany and zoology of the island. Aristotle married Hermias' adoptive daughter (or niece) Pythias. She bore him a daughter, whom they named Pythias. Soon after Hermias' death, Aristotle was invited by Philip II of Macedon to become the tutor to his son Alexander the Great in 343 BC. Aristotle was appointed as the head of the royal academy of Macedon. During that time he gave lessons not only to Alexander, but also to two other future kings: Ptolemy and Cassander. In his Politics, Aristotle states that only one thing could justify monarchy, and that was if the virtue of the king and his family were greater than the virtue of the rest of the citizens put together.
Aristotle’s Teleology:

- “Nature does nothing in vain.”

- Aristotle rejected Plato’s theory of the forms and instead proposed that reality is material and the forms (eidos) are only part of what is essential to this world – in other words, the form is the shape or plan or design of a material thing. Aristotle saw the world as an ordered and purposeful organic whole.
Further, Aristotle argued that we could understand this material world through an examination of how it comes to be - in terms of its causes. Aristotle’s concept of causality is different from our modern understanding – for him once you know a thing’s causes then you know all there is to be known about that thing – so causality is akin to the description of not only what it is made up of and how it happened but also what it is for. Everything in Aristotle’s world has a purpose.

**The four causes:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>what it is made of</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>the shape it takes &amp; the concept behind its creation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficient</td>
<td>whatever brought the form and material together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final</td>
<td>what it is for (usually seen from an anthropocentric perspective)</td>
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Eudaimonia

- Defined as happiness, living well, flourishing
- It is that thing which we desire for itself and not for any other end.
- It requires a proper balance or sufficient quantity of four things: Honor (having friends), Fortune, Pleasure and Virtue.
Health, wealth, and other such resources—are sought because they promote well-being, not because they are what well-being consists in.

“Luck loves virtue” (Aristotle quoting someone else - could be Hessiod or Euripedes) These elements may be due in a good part to luck but are also closely tied to proper outcomes of consistently virtuous action.

These elements are necessary only because “someone who is friendless, childless, powerless, weak, and ugly will simply not be able to find many opportunities for virtuous activity over a long period of time, and what little he can accomplish will not be of great merit.”

(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)
Aristotle argues that the highest end of humans consists in “activity of the rational part of the soul in accordance with perfect virtue.”

“...what sets humanity off from other species, giving us the potential to live a better life, is our capacity to guide ourselves by using reason. If we use reason well, we live well as human beings.”

(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)
Definitions:
1. Acting with excellence
2. An activity of the rational part of the soul
3. Reason excellently applied
4. The means between the extremes

Two kinds of virtues:
- Practical or Moral – “the result of habit or custom”
- Intellectual – which “owes its birth and growth mainly to instruction and so requires time and experience.”
## Virtue: Reason Excellently Applied

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sophia (σοφία)</th>
<th>Phronēsis (φρόνησις)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>Practical Judgment</td>
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<tr>
<td>a combination of <em>nous</em> (the intellect) and <em>episteme</em> (knowledge).</td>
<td>Required for judging things according to the aim of living well overall</td>
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<tr>
<td>Allows one to know what qualities of the character are best</td>
<td>Allows one to apply a given quality of activity in any given context</td>
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Virtue: The means between the extremes

- The Golden Mean – not an arithmetic mean but a relative mean – the proper application of a quality in a given context

- Virtue is defined as the mean between the vice of excess and the vice of deficiency – too much of a characteristic is as bad as too little

- Each of us must assess our abilities and have a good understanding of the situation or context of our moral decisions.
Virtue: The means between the extremes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vice of Excess</th>
<th>Virtue</th>
<th>Vice of Deficiency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foolhardiness</td>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>Cowardice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrestrained giving</td>
<td>Liberality</td>
<td>Stinginess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drunkenness</td>
<td>Temperance</td>
<td>Abstinence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bragging</td>
<td>Truthfulness</td>
<td>Mock modesty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanity</td>
<td>Pride</td>
<td>Humility</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Virtue: The means between the extremes

- Aristotle says that the virtuous person “sees the truth in each case, being as it were a standard and measure of them”.... Aristotle thinks of the good person as someone who is good at deliberation, and he describes deliberation as a process of rational inquiry. The intermediate point that the good person tries to find is “determined by logos (“reason,” “account”) and in the way that the person of practical reason would determine it”

(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)
Virtue: The means between the extremes

• Is Aristotle’s doctrine of means the same as, “everything in moderation?” Can one be too virtuous?

• NO!
  • It is impossible to be too just – we can’t be too lawful or fair
  • It is impossible to be too courageous; as courage is just the right balance between rashness and cowardice – courage is hitting the mark just right
Virtue: Courage

- Aristotle argued the highest kind of courage is exhibited in actions done for their own sake – a kind of beauty.

- One who is courageous may feel fear – as it is rational to do so, but they are able to balance that fear with a proper confidence.

“Woman Wrestled Fresh Ammo Clip From Tucson Shooter as He Tried to Reload: Patricia Maisch Hailed as One of the Heroes Who Stopped Tucson Slaughter”
Virtue: Courage

- “For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy.”
- Virtues must become habituated – over time through repeated activity we become courageous.
There are other kinds of courage, such as that of the Trojan hero Hektor.

Aristotle says this is largely a result of penalties for cowardice and honors for bravery.

This is different from true courage because it is not based on voluntary actions aimed at being beautiful in their own right.

But this is close to the best sort of courage as it is important for soldiers to fight as if they were brave.
Virtue: Pride

- The rational assessment of self worth in the context of the *polis*.
- It is **not** the same as arrogance (*hubris*) or vanity.
- Aristotle called it the “crowning virtue” as it is fundamental to the inculcation of all the other moral virtues.
Can Everyone Be Virtuous?

- “What a personage says or does reveals a certain moral purpose; and a good element of character, if the purpose so revealed is good. Such goodness is possible in every type of personage, even in a woman.”

- Aristotle: *On the Art of Poetry* (tr. Ingram Bywater)
"[T]he relation of male to female is by nature a relation of superior to inferior and ruler to ruled" (1245b12). And just as with the rule of the master over the slave, the difference here is one of reason: "The slave is wholly lacking the deliberative element; the female has it but it lacks authority; the child has it but it is incomplete" (1260a11).

- Aristotle: *Politics* (tr. Carnes Lord)
Some Objections to Aristotle’s Virtue Theory:

- Aristotle asks too much of his moral agent; few if any people can achieve excellence in rationality all the time.
- The theory isn’t very action guiding – for each situation, each moral agent may act differently – there aren’t any clear universalizable rules to go by.
- What if what we’re good at is not something that is a good thing – problem is that the answer becomes circular – it is bad because it is not good.
- Why must one assume there is just one purpose for each thing or person – why can’t there be many purposes & a multitude of functions?
- Suppose that the purpose of all things is a myth – suppose there is no higher purpose & everything is random and accidental? Then the only sense of purpose is that which individuals assign to things.