

Aristotle, The Nicomachean Ethics

Reid Blackman

Book I: 1-7, 11-19, 24-27 [sections 1.1-1.5, 1.7-1.9, 1.13]

Book II: 28-39, 45-47 [2.1-2.6, 2.9]

Book VI: 142-143 [6.5]

Book VIII: 192-206, 215-216 [8.1-8.8, 8.13]

Book IX: 227-241, 246-247 [9.4-9.9, 9.12]

Book X: 248-276 [10.1-10.9]

“[A]s in the Olympic Games it is not the most beautiful and the strongest that are crowned but those who compete...so those who act win, and rightly win, the noble and good things in life” (16).

Aiming at the Good

1. Ends, goals, may be a) objects produced by practicing an “art” (skill) or b) activities themselves.
 - *As for (a)*: The end of medical art is healing, the end of shipbuilding is a vessel, the end of strategy is victory, the end of economics is wealth, etc.
 - *As for (b)*: The end of rock climbing is climbing, the end of gymnastics is gymnastics, the end of sex is sex, etc.
 - There is no end beyond the activity itself (though there can be, e.g. competition).
2. Some ends and arts are subordinate to others in that we pursue them for the sake of some further end or art; the ends of the master art are more important (“to be preferred”) than the ends of the subordinate ones.
 - For example: i) one learns accounting, law, and contracts for the sake of money-making, ii) surgery and diagnosis of medical problems for the sake of curing people, iii) contracts and the law for the sake of helping people in legal trouble, iv) learning rules of grammar and new words for the sake of understanding and appreciating literature, and so on.
 - The things we do not for the sake of something else but for their own sake are “chief goods” (2) or “final goods” or the “highest goods” (11).
3. “Will not the knowledge of it [the chief good], then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right?” (2).
 - “To entrust to chance what is greatest and most noble would be a very defective arrangement” (18).
 - Without a chief good “[o]ur desire would be empty and vain” (2).

Question: What is the master art, and what does it aim at?

Answer: The art of politics, which aims at “the good for man” (2).

Question: What is the good for man?

Generally accepted answer, and accepted by Aristotle: happiness/flourishing

Happiness is the Chief Good

Aristotle’s argument:

1. We pursue things either (a) for the sake of something else, b) for the sake of something else *and* for their own sake, and c) for their own sake and *not* for the sake of something else.
2. Things in (c) are “more final” than those in (a) or (b); they are “final without qualification” (11).
3. Honor, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that through them we shall be happy [they are in (b)]. (12).
4. Happiness is something chosen for itself and never for the sake of something else [it is in (c)]
5. Thus, happiness is the chief good/final good without qualification/the ultimate end of action.

Central Question: But there are different views of what happiness/flourishing is, that is, different views of what the good of man consists in. What, then, is the good of man?

What Happiness/Flourishing/the Good of a Human Being Is

Beginnings of an attempt at an answer with a particular example:

1. The good of a flautist is that at which a flautist aims.
2. What a flautist aims at is determined by her function.
3. A flautist's function is that which is peculiar (specific) to flautists.
4. Flute playing is peculiar to flautists.
5. The function of a flautist is flute playing.
6. The flautist aims at flute playing.
7. The good of a flautist is flute playing.

More generally:

1. The good of an x is that at which an x aims.
2. What an x aims at is determined by an x's function.
3. An x's function is that which is peculiar (specific) to x's.
4. y-ing is peculiar to x's.
5. The function of an x is y-ing.
6. X aims at y-ing.
7. The good of an x is y-ing.

What we want is the good of a human being. So:

1. The good of a human being is that at which a human being aims.
2. What a human being aims at is determined by a human being's function.
3. A human being's function is that which is peculiar to human beings.
4. Y-ing is peculiar to human beings.
5. The function of a human being is y-ing.
6. Human beings aim at y-ing.
7. The good of a human being is y-ing.

Question: But what is y-ing? What is a human being's function?

Proposal: Let us look closer at human nature so we may see what is peculiar to human beings.

Human Nature and the Rational Function

Two main parts: (a) irrational (or better, nonrational) and (b) rational

As for (a):

- i. The vegetative element (having to do with nutrition).
- ii. The appetitive, perceiving, and desiring element (that does not listen to the rational part).

As for (b):

- i. That which commands (decisions, choices, conclusions of deliberation).
- ii. That which obeys ((some) desires and emotions).

To repeat: What is a human being's function?

Proposal #1: The function of a human being is to live (to have the nutrients that sustain human beings).

Fatal objection: Plants live too, so living is not peculiar to human beings and so is not their function (13).

Proposal #2: The function of a human being is to perceive and to desire.

Fatal objection: But non-human animals do the same.

Final proposal: The function of a human being is to follow the rational part of the soul. More specifically, the function of a human being is to think, choose (what to do), and act rationally.

1. The good of a human being is that at which a human being aims.
2. What a human being aims at is determined by a human being's function.
3. A human being's function is that which is peculiar to human beings.
4. Thinking, choosing, and acting rationally is peculiar to human beings.
5. The function of a human being is to think, choose, and act rationally.
6. Human beings aim at thinking, choosing, and acting rationally.
7. The good of a human being is thinking, choosing, and acting rationally.

Question: But how, exactly, is one to think, choose, and act rationally?

Answer: Avoid excess and deficiency (30-1).

“[I]t is no easy task to be good. For in everything it is no easy task to find the middle...to do [some action] to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, *that is* not for everyone, nor is it easy; wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble” (45).

Some advice then:

- i. Aim for the extreme to which one is not inclined, “for we shall get into the intermediate state by drawing well away from error, as people do in straightening sticks that are bent” (46).
- ii. “Now in everything the pleasant or pleasure is most to be guarded against; for we do not judge it impartially” (46).

Developing the Rational Part of the Soul So That One Chooses Correctly: The Virtues

There are *dispositions* to thinking, choosing, and acting rationally.

- The disposition to act rightly in the face of fear is *courage*, and opposed to rashness and cowardice. The disposition to act rightly in the face of temptation is *temperance*, and opposed to indulgence and insensitivity, the disposition to act rightly in the face of that which provokes anger is *good temperedness*, and is opposed to irascibility and doormattedness (the Greek translation is a bit fuzzy), and so on.
- Dispositions to choose the mean between the extremes – these states of character – are the *virtues*.
- One who has all the virtues is “able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect, e.g. about what sorts of thing conduce to health or to strength, but about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general” (142). Such a person has *practical wisdom*.
- Most generally: the virtues are character traits constitutive and conducive to living a good life.

Virtue and (Rational) Emotion

But being virtuous is more than proper choice; it requires having the proper emotions and desires as well.

- One's anger/desire/resentment, and so on, should be appropriate to the situation.

A properly virtuous person has rational emotions. For example:

1. One ought to most love what is most lovable.
2. Virtue is most lovable.
3. One ought to most love virtue.

The virtuous life is pleasant.

- A life lived in accordance with this part of the soul is a virtuous one; the lover of virtue finds virtue pleasant, and so will find a virtuous life pleasant.
- “Their life, therefore, has no further need of pleasure as a sort of adventitious charm, but has its pleasure in itself.”
- The pleasures proper to man are those pleasures the most perfect man has. All other pleasures are pleasures in a “secondary and fractional way” (260).

Four types of people: virtuous, continent, incontinent, and vicious.

Question: How does one come to not only make the right judgments, but also to have the right emotions?

Answer:

- We should be pained and pleased by the right things (31-2), and must have a sense of shame (270), both of which require the appropriate upbringing (270-1).
- Becoming virtuous requires not abstract, philosophical study, but *action* (35, 270).
- “Thus, in one word, states of character arise out of like activities” (29, 31).
 - “[M]en become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts” (29).

The contemplative life is the highest (best) life.

1. “If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be that of the best thing in us” (13-14, 263).
2. Contemplation/reasoning (about abstract matters) is what is highest in us.
3. The best life/the highest happiness consists in contemplation.

And as before:

4. Pleasure from higher elements of the self are better pleasures.
5. Thought is the highest element.
6. Pleasures from thought are the best pleasures. (259).

Is Virtue Everything We Need?

Virtue is not Sufficient For Happiness; *external good* are needed (17).

- The brave man needs power, the liberal man needs money, and the temperate man opportunity to abstain from great pleasures, but the contemplative man needs none of these things.
- Arguably the most important external good: friendship.
 - “For without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods” (192).

Three Kinds of Friendship

“The kinds of friendship may perhaps be cleared up if we first come to know the object of love. For not everything seems to be loved but only the lovable, and this is [a] good, [b] pleasant, or [c] useful” (194).

- Thus: *virtue friends, pleasure friends, and useful friends*.
- “[T]hose who love each other wish well to each other in that respect in which they love one another” (195).

Only good men can be perfect friends; all other friendships are inferior (196, 198).

- Friendships take time to develop because it takes time to trust and recognize lovable characteristics, both of which are requisite for stable relationships.

Love is a feeling, friendship a state of character, (200).

- But loving is part of the essence of virtue friendship (205).
- Friends must want to “live together” (246).
- Virtuous friends make us better, vicious friends make us worse.

The best lives are lived with virtuous friends.

1. The supremely happy man lacks nothing truly pleasant.
2. A virtuous friend is truly pleasant to the virtuous man.
3. Thus, the supremely happy man must have virtuous friends.

Friendship and self-love

A virtuous person is a friend to herself (227).

Non-virtuous people are enemies to themselves (229).

Question: Should one love oneself the most?

Common answer: such people are selfish (234).

Aristotle's answer: one should love oneself the most if one is virtuous (235).

Question: Why the common confusion?

Answer: Many who use the phrase "lover of self" also use the term to refer to people who go after the wrong things, e.g. pleasure, wealth, and honors (235).

- Virtuous people choose what is best and noblest for themselves; these are the acts of true self-love (236).

An Alternative View on the Chief Good: Pleasure

Now let's look at an alternative to Aristotle's picture. It consists in the claim that the chief or highest or most final good is pleasure and only pleasure.

Question: Is pleasure the only good?

Eudox answers yes: a) Pleasure is good because all things aim at it, and all things aim at their own good, and b) it makes any good – just or temperate action – better (249).

Aristotle's reply:

- Some pleasures are good, some are bad (259).
 - These things give pleasure to people of vicious constitution, but we must not suppose that they are also pleasant to others, just as we do not reason so about the things that are wholesome or sweet or bitter to sick people, or ascribe whiteness to the things that seem white to those suffering from a disease of the eye (253).
 - Some things are pleasurable – e.g. wealth – but not when it comes from bad sources, e.g. from the result of betrayal.
 - There are disgraceful pleasures, e.g. the pleasures of violence, getting revenge, proving one's superiority, schadenfreude, etc.
- Pleasure is not all we aim at.
 - Plato argues the same: i) the pleasant life is more desirable with wisdom than without, ii) if the mixture is better, pleasure is not the chief good; for the good cannot become more desirable by the addition of anything to it" (250).
 - Pleasures differ in kind. "Those derived from noble sources are different from those derived from base sources, and one cannot get the pleasure of the just man without being just, nor that of the musical man without being musical, and so on" (253). Further, the pleasures of the virtuous are higher pleasures.
 - "[N]o one would choose to live with the intellect of a child throughout his life, however much he were to be pleased at the things that children are pleased at, nor to get enjoyment by doing some most disgraceful deed.
 - Happiness does not lie in amusement (262).
 - Serious things are better than laughable things.