

The Nicomachean Ethics I

Book I: Aristotle's Theory of the Good

Chapter 1-2: Means and Ends

Basic methodological principle: All things desire the good

There is a hierarchy of ends:

Some ends are subordinate to others

The subordinate ends is desired for the sake of the higher end

There cannot an infinite hierarchy of ends, since if there were there would be no determinate end
- and so our desire would be in vain

[Note the general rejection of infinite regresses]

Therefore there must be a highest end

The highest end is the supreme good

Chapter 2: Politics - the science of the highest good

The highest science is concerned with the highest good

The highest science is political science

Political science dictates to all other sciences

It dictates what should be studied and by whom

The good of the individual is identified with the good of the city state

The individual can find his highest good only in the life of the city-state

Chapter 3: The limits of political science

The subject matter of political science is 'fine and just actions'

Opinions on what these are vary greatly from state to state

Goods vary in the same way

What is good for one group of people may be harmful to others

So claims in political science can only be about what is generally so, not about what must always be so

Compare the universal generalisations of natural science

Chapters 3-4: The study of political science

Political science must start from generally accepted principles

It can only be practiced by those able to assess claims about the right way to act

Such judgment requires experience and so maturity

So political science is not for the immature - either in years or judgement

The goal of political science is action

The goal is not to make men knowledgeable but to make them good

Recognition of first principles comes only with practice in living correctly, through *habituation* in the proper way of life.

Someone who has not grasped these principles by experiencing a properly ordered life should listen to those who have.

By acquiring the correct habits, by *practice* and habituation, a man may grasp the principles that are appropriate for the knowledge that is possible in practical matters.

A child brought up correctly will recognise that some action is the right one *without necessarily knowing why it is right*.

He will *know that it is right* but not necessarily *know why it is right*.

Chapters 4-5: *Eudaimonia* (Happiness, or Flourishing)

We agree on the name for the highest good 'eudaimonia' (happiness, flourishing)

Word suggests being well governed, or ruled, by a supernatural power

Contains ideas of having good fortune, happiness, prosperity, contentment

Common beliefs about highest good:

(1) most men seem to take physical pleasure to be the highest good
- especially the less educated

(2) Those who engage in politics take the highest good to be honour and fame

But they locate highest good in something utterly unreliable since fame and fortune depend on entirely contingent circumstances

What they really want is to be honoured because of their virtue

Shows that virtue is a higher good

But virtue alone is no guarantee against misfortune

Since *eudaimonia* implies good fortune, it must involve something more

You can be virtuous without being fortunate

(3) The life of contemplation

Recall how Aristotle characterises the activity of the Prime Mover

Chapter 6: The Highest Good is not a Platonic Form

Honour truth above your friends

The good is not identical in all actions so a single separate idea cannot constitute the highest good

‘Good’ is equivocal

The same name is used but with a different definition with respect to what is useful, to pleasure, honour, wisdom etc

If the highest good were a platonic idea it would not be attainable men

But the highest good must be something that can be found in all human actions as that toward which they are all ultimately directed.

Chapter 7: The nature of the highest good

The highest good is that for the sake of which everything else is done

Distinguish things we desire in order to obtain other things and things we desire for themselves

The highest good is that which is desirable for itself and never for the sake of something else

The highest good is flourishing/ happiness - The highest good is complete / entirely self-sufficient

‘... by self-sufficient we do not mean what is sufficient for a man by himself, for one who lives a solitary life, but also for parents, children, wife, and in general for his friends and fellow citizens since a man is naturally a political animal.’

But there is a limit

The Function Argument

When we qualify something of a kind *K* as a good *K* we are claiming that it performs the characteristic function of *K*’s well

Example - a good sculptor = someone who performs the characteristic functions of a sculptor well

Likewise a man is a good man if he performs the characteristic functions of a man well

The highest good for a man is to perform the characteristic function of men as well as possible

The characteristic function of a man is an activity of the soul which follows or implies a rational principle

‘... the function of a man is a certain way of life, and this is an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man is the good and noble performance of these, and any action is performed well when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence (=virtue) ... <so> the good for man is activity of the soul in accordance with virtue’

In a complete life

Chapter 8: Confirmation of the function argument

The most proper goods are goods of the soul

A human being is happy in living and doing well

Note that the highest good lies in activity not in potentiality

The life of virtuous is the life of happiness

But a necessary condition for such a life is the provision of external goods

‘... it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the proper equipment. ... and there are some things the lack of which takes the lustre from happiness, as good birth, goodly children, beauty; for the man who is very ugly in appearance or ill-born or solitary and childless is not very likely to be happy, ... ’

Chapter 9: The acquisition of happiness

Happiness is the result of virtue

Virtue is acquired by ‘a certain kind of study and care’

Therefore neither animals nor children are virtuous

Therefore neither animals nor children are happy

Chapter 10-11: When is a man happy?

The account of the good for humans refers to a complete life

So can we not say that a man is happy when he is alive?

How does what happens after his death affect the assessment of whether he is happy?

Aristotle’s conclusion seems to be that we should call those who are virtuous happy even though we don’t know what the future holds

While what happens to their descendents has some affect on the dead but not such as to make the happy unhappy or the unhappy happy

Chapter 12: The relation of virtue and happiness

Virtue, e.g. justice, is praised, happiness is above praise

Chapter 13: Virtue and the structure of the soul

Politics studies virtue so the student of politics must know something about the soul

The soul has rational and a non-rational parts

A part of the non-rational part may be influenced by the rational part

We praise the success of the rational over the non-rational part

The desiring and appetitive part may be influenced by the rational part

There are two kinds of virtues:

(1) Intellectual virtues = the virtues of the rational part of the soul

- theoretical wisdom, comprehension, practical wisdom

(2) Virtues of character (moral virtues), involve the influence of the rational on the non rational

- temperance, prudence etc.

Nicomachean Ethics, Book II

Chapter 1: The Virtues of Character

Two types of virtue:

(a) virtues of thought (= intellectual virtues)

- acquired mostly by being taught

(b) virtue of character

- acquired by habituation (= practice)

There are no innate virtues of character

Example: we become courageous by acting appropriately in the face of danger

A good constitution thus aims to produce good citizens by habituating them to good actions

Chapter 2: Basic Methodological Principle

The subject matter of practical science is cannot support the kind of universal generalisations which hold in the natural sciences

Practical principles apply differently in different circumstances

In each case what is appropriate has to be determined by the judgement of the individual good man acting in those circumstances

In general:

(1) the virtuous action in given circumstances will be that which is the MEAN between excess and deficiency

(2) virtue is produced by repeated virtuous action which increases the capacity to act in this way

Chapter 3: Pleasure and Pain

(3) virtuous actions will be performed with pleasure

Training in virtue will require rewarding virtuous actions and punishing vicious actions

The central concern of political science is pleasure and pain

Chapter 4: How we become virtuous

We become virtuous by acting virtuously

It is possible to produce a craft object accidentally

But to act virtuously an agent must be in the appropriate condition when he acts

- (1) He must know what he is doing
- (2) He must choose the act for its own sake
- (3) His actions must result from established dispositions

Example: An act is a just act only if it is the act of a just man

Chapter 5: The psychology of virtue

What are the virtues and vices:

- (a) Passion (= emotions) - eg desire (appetite), anger, fear etc.?

No - are not said to be good or bad merely for being angry

- (b) Capacities (faculties) for exhibiting an emotion

No - we are not said to be good or bad because we are capable of anger etc

- (c) Dispositions (states, habits) - to act in a particular way when an emotion is present.

Yes - we are said to be good if we exhibit the appropriate degree of anger.

Chapter 6: The definition of virtue

A virtue is what makes something excellent in a certain respect

Where something relevant to human action may take on a continuous range of values between extremes we may distinguish between:

- (1) The mean in the 'object' - e.g. 5 is midway between 0 and 10 lbs of meat.
- (2) The mean for the agent - i.e. the appropriate value of the quantity for the agent

6 lbs of meat is right for Milo but too much for the beginning wrestler

The same holds for dispositions to action

For any emotion and any agent in any situation there is a 'mean' between extremes which is appropriate for that agent in that situation

Definition: A virtue is a disposition of an agent with respect to a particular emotion to choose the appropriate mean action for that agent in any situation

The mean for a given agent in a given situation is what he would choose in that situation if he were a WISE MAN.

For some kinds of actions there is no mean - and no associated virtue, e.g. spite, shamelessness, envy, adultery, theft, murder

Chapter 7: The particular virtues - Aristotle's table:

Emotion / inclination	Deficiency	Mean	Excess
Fear	Cowardice	Courage	Rashness
Pleasure	Insensibility	Temperance	Self-indulgence
Giving money (small amounts)	Meanness	Liberality	Prodigality
Giving money (large amounts)	Niggardliness	Magnificence	Tastelessness
Honour	Undue humility	Proper pride	Empty vanity
Anger	'Inirascibility'	Good temper	Irascibility
Truth telling	Mock modesty	Truthfulness	Boastfulness
Pleasantness (in giving amusement)	Boorishness	Ready wit	Bufoonery
Pleasantness (in general)	Quarrelsome	Friendly	Obsequious
Shame	Shameless	Modest	Bashful
Pleasure / pain (at fortune / misfortune of others) ¹	Spite	Righteous indignation	Envy

Chapters 9 & 10: Finding the Mean

One extreme is often more opposed to the mean than another

¹Aristotle conflates two different ideas here. The envious person feels too much pain when someone does well, the righteously indignant person feels the right amount of pain when someone undeservedly does well, the spiteful person feels too little pain when someone suffers an undeserved misfortune.

‘In everything it is no easy task to find the mean’

In finding the mean start from the more opposed extreme

Strive to move away from this error

This is all very difficult - e.g. how much anger is appropriate?

It all turns on perceiving the matter correctly

***Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III**

Chapter 3: Deliberation

Deliberation is reasoned choice. We deliberate about what is in our power to bring about and not about things which are not in our power.

The ends are given and we deliberate about the means to achieve these ends.

Aristotle has no notion of a radically free choice entirely undetermined by anything external to itself.

Weakness of the will - acting in some way other than that which deliberation shows to be correct
- is thus a great puzzle for him.