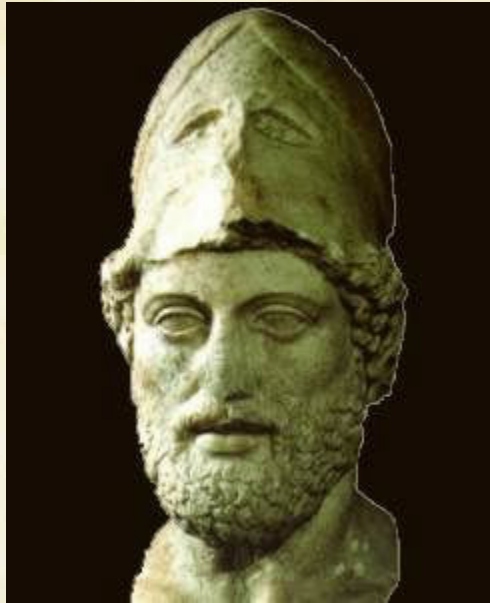


Philosophy 302

Mediaeval Philosophy

Lecture 9



Pericles

**Aristotle's Moral Theory**

**The Nicomachean Ethics**

## **Book I: Aristotle's Theory of the Good**

### **Chapter 1-2: Means and Ends**

**Basic methodological principle:**

**All things desire the good**

The 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 desires 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 right way about the 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.)

The 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.

This 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 by 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 between 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 to flourish.

The highest good is 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.’

## 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 the virtuous man 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 say that a man is happy before his life is complete?

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.

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 part of the soul:

- 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 political 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 - we 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 kilos of meat.
- (2) The mean for the agent - i.e. the appropriate value of the quantity for the agent.

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





**Milo of Croton**

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

<b>Emotion / inclination</b>	<b>Deficiency</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Excess</b>
Pleasantness (in giving amusement)	Boorishness	Ready wit	Bufoonery
Pleasantness (in general)	Quarrelsome	Friendly	Obsequious
Shame	Shameless	Modest	Bashful
Pleasure / pain (at fortune of others)	Spite	Righteous indignation	Envy

## Chapters 8 & 9: Finding the Mean

One extreme is often more opposed to the mean than another.

‘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.