

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2005  
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Lecture Notes, March 14

## I. Human ends

We saw how Aristotle argues that the telos of human life is happiness, since humans seek it.  
The question now concerns the nature of that happiness, and how to seek it.  
If we want to know what it is to be a good (thus happy, virtuous) person, we have to know what it is to be a person.  
A good person will just be someone who performs that function well.  
As the flute player and the good flute player have the same function.

What activity is particularly human?

Life?

But plants and animals have it

Perception, interaction with environment?

Other animals have this.

Only humans have rational activity.

See pp 52-53.

Human good is thus activity of the soul (mind and body) in accordance with virtue.

That is, the good person is the one who thinks, and tries to develop good habits.

Virtues are just those characteristics which will enable you to live a good life, free from worry.

Happiness (Eudaimonia) is achieved at the end of a good life, not in the middle.

It also requires certain "external goods," p 53.

So far, all we know is that there are some virtues (habits) that we should try to cultivate.

These will make us happy in the end.

But what are these virtues?

## II. The virtues

Aristotle discusses two kinds of virtues: intellectual and moral, p 54.

The intellectual virtues are learned by teaching.

E.g. knowledge of history.

We need mainly experience and time to learn this.

Intellectual virtues are not our concern.

The moral virtues are learned by habit, practice.

These are the characteristics of the happy person.

Moral virtue is a mean between two extremes.

Excess and defect are fatal, pp 54-55.

We call these 'vices'.

Consider driving a car, at a moderate speed.  
Courage lies between foolishness and cowardice.

There is no set list of virtues.  
These will vary with our particular ends, and with our moral starting points.

Plato's four virtues:

Courage

Wisdom

Temperance (for most pleasures and pains)

Justice

(Plato was Aristotle's teacher.)

Note the differences between Plato's first three virtues and his fourth.

Aristotle adds, among others:

Liberality with money, between prodigality and meanness

Proper pride, between vanity and boastfulness

Ambition, between undue humility and mock modesty

Wit between buffoonery and boorishness

Friendliness between obsequiousness and surliness

Modesty between shamelessness and bashfulness

Righteous indignation between enviousness and spitefulness

III. Criticism #1: Virtue is supposed to be in our interest, but justice, seems to be against our interests

For Aristotle, virtue is supposed to be in your self-interest, by definition.

Virtues are those characteristics which lead a man to happiness.

Note that courage, wisdom, temperance are all pretty clearly in one's self-interest.

But justice seems to be on the other side.

Consider the ring of Gyges: if we had it, we would not be just.

This shows that it is in our interest to be unjust, as long as we are not caught.

IV. Criticism #2: Isn't morality supposed to oppose self-interest?

Why should we think that this theory yields morality, as we think of it?

This may be a theory of how best to live, but it's not a theory of how to do the right thing.

MacIntyre will defend virtue ethics against this charge, if indirectly.

For Aristotle, "what is the right act?" is just the wrong question to ask.

We should rather ask: "Who should I become?" or "What is the good life?" or "How shall I live?"

These may not be very helpful in answering isolated moral questions.

But maybe those aren't the questions we should be asking.

V. Criticism #3: Not all virtues are means between extremes.

Consider honesty.

But, this seems an eliminable part of Aristotle's theory.