

Aristotle - Nicomachean Ethics Books I & II

Richard Walters 2016

Happiness

"We call final without qualification that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else."

"Happiness seems, however, even if it is not god-sent but comes as a result of virtue and some process of learning or training, to be among the most godlike things; for that which is the prize and end of virtue seems to be the best thing in the world, and something godlike and blessed."

"Human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, in a complete life."

The Soul

Aristotle doesn't describe the soul in the first two books. But, he does divide it up.

"one element in the soul is irrational and one has a rational principle."

Virtue

"By human virtue we mean not that of the body but that of the soul; and happiness also we call an activity of soul."

"some of the virtues are intellectual and others moral, philosophic wisdom and understanding and practical wisdom being intellectual, liberality and temperance moral."

1. Intellectual Virtue. "intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching"
2. Moral Virtue. "moral virtue comes about as a result of habit"

How do we get virtue?

"The virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men 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."

First Principles

1. Principles of Being
 - a. Material
 - b. Formal
 - c. Efficient
 - d. Final
2. Principles of Knowledge: Self-Evident, or true in themselves.

The first principles can only be grasped through "intuitive wisdom".

"Plato, too, was right in raising this question and asking, as he used to do, 'are we on the way from or to the first principles?'"

Politics

To Aristotle, politics was the highest aim of philosophy.

"Since politics uses the rest of the sciences, and since again, it legislates as to what we are to do and what we are to abstain from, the end of this science must include those of the others, so that this end must be the good for man."

"political science spends most of its pains on making the citizens to be of a certain character, viz. good and capable of noble acts."

"The true student of politics, too, is thought to have studied virtue above all things; for he wishes to make his fellow citizens good and obedient to the laws."

"Anyone who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is noble and just, and generally, about the subjects of political science must have been brought up in good habits."

"The man who does not rejoice in noble actions is not even good."

Three types of life:

1. Pleasure
2. Political
3. Contemplative life

Aristotle goes into each of these at length in later books.

Material Possessions

"In many actions we use friends and riches and political power as instruments; 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, and perhaps a man would be still less likely if he had thoroughly bad children or friends or had lost good children or friends by death. As we said, then, happiness seems to need this sort of prosperity in addition; for which reason some identify happiness with good fortune, though others identify it with virtue."

Lasting Happiness

"we have assumed happiness to be something permanent and by no means easily changed, while a single man may suffer many turns of fortune's wheel. For clearly if we were to keep pace with his fortunes, we should often call the same man happy and again wretched, making the happy man out to be chameleon and insecurely based." "no function of man has so much permanence as virtuous activities (these are thought to be more durable even than knowledge of the sciences)" "If activities are, as we said, what gives life its character, no happy man can become miserable; for he will never do the acts that are hateful and mean. For the man who is truly good and wise, we think, bears all the chances life becomingly and always makes the best of circumstances"

"The good we divine to be something proper to a man and not easily taken from him." "It is hard, too, to see how a weaver or a carpenter will be benefited in regard to his own craft by knowing this 'good itself', or how the man who has viewed the Idea itself will be a better doctor or general thereby."

Pleasure and Pain

"Pleasure is a state of soul."

"We must take as a sign of states of character the pleasure or pain that ensues on acts; for the man who abstains from bodily pleasures and delights in this very fact is temperate, while the man who is annoyed at it is self-indulgent, and he who stands his ground against things that are terrible and

delights in this or at least is not pained is brave, while the man who is pained is a coward. For moral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of the pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of the pain that we abstain from noble ones. Hence we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought; for this is the right education."

Punishment is a "kind of cure" for vice.

Virtue and Vice

They are concerned with the same things.

Three of Choice

1. the noble
2. the advantageous
3. the pleasant

Three of avoidance

1. the base
2. the injurious
3. the painful

Knowledge, Choice and Character

It is not enough to simply do virtuous acts.

"When he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character."

Intermediate between excess and defect

"By the intermediate in the object I mean that which is equidistant from each of the extremes, which is one and the same for all men; by the intermediate relatively to us that which is neither too much nor too little – and this is not one, nor the same for all. For instance, if ten is many and two is few, six is the intermediate, taken in terms of the object; for it exceeds and is exceeded by an equal amount; this is intermediate according to arithmetical proportion. But the intermediate relatively to us is not to be taken so; if ten pounds are too much for a particular person to eat and two too little, it does not follow that the trainer will order six pounds; for this also is perhaps too much for the person who is to take it, or too little – too little for Milo, too much for the beginner in athletic exercises. The same is true of running and wrestling. Thus a master of any art avoids excess and defect, but seeks the intermediate and chooses this – the intermediate not in the object but relatively to us."

*"Virtue must have the quality of aiming at the intermediate."
"For instance, both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt*

both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue."

Class of the Unlimited

But, "it is possible to fail in many ways (for evil belongs to the class of the unlimited, as the Pythagoreans conjectured, and good to that of the limited), while to succeed is possible only in one way."

"It would be equally absurd, then, to expect that in unjust, cowardly, and voluptuous action there should be a mean, an excess, and a deficiency." "Not every action nor every passion admits of a mean; for some have names that already imply badness, e.g. spite, shamelessness, envy, and in the case of actions adultery, theft, murder; for all of these and suchlike things imply by their names that they are themselves bad, and not the excesses or deficiencies of them."

If it is possible to fail in so many ways, how do we know what is intermediate? The answer is, we don't. Only the man of practical wisdom will know.

The Circle

"Hence also it is no easy task to be good. For in everything it is no easy task to find the middle, e.g. to find the middle of a circle is not for every one but for him who knows"

SPHERE OF ACTION OR FEELING	EXCESS	MEAN	DEFICIENCY
Fear and Confidence	Rashness	Courage	Cowardice
Pleasure and Pain	Licentiousness/Self-indulgence	Temperance	Insensibility
Getting and Spending (minor)	Prodigality	Liberality	Illiberality/Meanness
Getting and Spending (major)			
Honor and Dishonor (major)	Vanity	Magnificence	Pettiness/Stinginess
Honor and Dishonor (minor)			
Anger	Ambition/empty vanity	Proper ambition/pride	Un-ambitiousness/undue humility
Self-expression	Irascibility	Patience/Good temper	Lack of spirit/un-irascibility
Conversation	Boastfulness	Truthfulness	Understatement/mock modesty
Social Conduct	Buffoonery	Wittiness	Boorishness
Shame	Obsequiousness	Friendliness	Cantankerousness
Indignation	Shyness	Modesty	Shamelessness
	Envy	Righteous indignation	Malicious enjoyment/Spitefulness

Other Notes on Happiness

Eudaimonia - the aim of all, happiness, flourishing

Plato, three aspects need to be in harmony: Reason, Physical appetites, a spiritual element concerned with success and harmony. But, it can only pop up in a specific setting, which is why he writes the Republic. Fulfill what an educated philosopher would want.

Aristotle. Practical concern to model what it would be to have Eudaimonia. The person of practical wisdom.

Epicurius. Many pleasures contain the seed of pain in them, and this was to be avoided. Hedonism would be the seeking of pleasure for its own sake. Happiness is more high minded.

Stoics. Atoraxia, was a sense of tranquility in the face of nature. It is insensible, not caring for anything? Lacking in ordinary human feeling. Apathetic. Everything that happens is ultimately for the best. Providence, and fate. However, they believed strongly in social commitment. Engagement with society. Not like the Cynics.

Christianity. State of grace. City of God. More of a return to Platonism. Happiness is in the presence of God. In heaven. Post final judgement.

Greek Renaissance. Erasmus. Thomas Moore, Utopia. Rebirth in aiming at happiness. Build the outside world such that the mind is stimulated toward happiness? Beauty, appreciation. City planning, and adornment. Existence is to be celebrated.

Kant "Summum Bonum" - the highest good, especially as the ultimate goal according to which values and priorities are established in an ethical system.

Hobbes, Locke Finality is not happiness. Life is a restless procession of desire. It is a subjective preference.

It is important to know first what you think human nature is. And then happiness could be the actualization of your higher nature. Later as we are less sure about what man's purpose is, we have many more differing ideas.

Romantics. Happiness is trivial. In unhappiness you find depth of true happiness? Sense of loss and longing for a period of wholeness. An elevation of the will which needs to drive everything (telos - reason). You're only alive when you live on the edge. Tortured romantic hero. Don't confuse the process with the product. The artists created great works, but might not have been happy themselves.

Romantics. Deeply feeling artists who are not depressed, but rather they are in touch with harmony.

Utilitarianism. "Greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation."

Bentham. Each individual seeks their own pleasure. Pleasure is happiness. As we seek our own happiness, we also are seeking the happiness of the greatest number.

Mill. We need a distinction between different kinds of pleasure and happiness. More back toward Plato. Reason and imagination

are higher pursuits. (he has a chart) "Better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied."