

Lecture 6.1 Aristotle – Nicomachean Ethics – Book 1 and Book2

1. In Book 1 of his Nicomachean Ethics, A claims that everything is aimed at some good. That is why A defines the good as something that is desirable. A differentiates **between 2 kinds of good**: proximate (instrumental) good and chief good. The proximate good is something that is desired not for its own sake but merely as a means to something else. The chief good is something that is desired for its own sake (in itself), not merely as a means to something else. For A, for something to be the chief good, there are 3 criteria that must be meant: it must be something **attainable**, it must be **final**, and it must be self-sufficient. Given these criteria, for A, the chief good can only consists in ***eudaimonia or happiness***.

This happiness can't consist in pleasure alone because the attainment of pleasure is subjective. The objects of please are **short-lived** (not long lasting) and have saturation point. Once the saturation point is reached, instead of giving please, it gives the opposite of pleasure (i.e., pain). A good example here is drinking – at the beginning and when taken moderately, it gives pleasure. But if you overindulged in it, it results in pain (as in 'hangover'), Also, unlike animals, humans have higher ends to pursue besides pleasure.

Happiness cannot consist in money either, because money is desirable only as a means to an end (i.e., only used to acquire other things) and not desired for its own sake.

Happiness cannot consist in honor or in fame either because **honor** is given as recognition of good, therefore there must be a greater good those honors seek to applaud. Also, **honor** is dependent on another conferring the honor to the person, whereas the happiness Aristotle is talking about must not be something that is dependent on other people. In other words, **honor** is a reputation that one holds, whereas happiness is something that cannot be taken from you (unlike a reputation). In regard to **fame**, fame can be **fleeting** and **short-lived**. Also, one can be **famous** for doing something **shameful or evil**.

2. Aristotle defines the proper function of human life as the activity of the rational soul in accordance with virtue. To Aristotle, someone is a good person if they performed their function, or their own distinct talent excellently, as well as lived a virtuous, rational and active life. For instance, a great painter would be fulfilling their function if they painted excellently, and would be good if they were virtuous, rational, and active.

For Aristotle, the proper function of human life **does not consist in only nutrition or growth** (because this is something that **plants** also do) or **in sensation and perception** (because this something that **animals** also do). Aristotle is looking for a **special human function**.

This proper or special human function consists in the activity of the soul in accord with reason (i.e., thinking and choosing) **that is done with virtue or excellence**. Relating back to his **Theory of Hylomorphism**, Aristotle believed that the human soul was distinct from the plant (vegetative) soul or animal (sentient) soul because of its

rationality (i.e., thinking and choosing). **Therefore, the human soul is fulfilling its proper function when rationality rules over our impulses** (i.e., we make our mind as excellent as possible through the acquisition of intellectual virtues (or virtues of thought) and make our will as excellent as possible through the acquisition of moral virtues (or virtues of character). In other words, for Aristotle, **we are happy when we are able to live virtuously and perform our individual talents excellently.**

3. In Book 2 of his Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle asserts that there are **two types of virtue: virtue of thought (intellectual virtue) and virtue of character (moral virtue)**. Both of these types of virtues are **acquired**. These virtues are **not inherently imbedded in us at birth**. **Virtue of thought or intellectual virtue is acquired through a life-long process of learning, observation and instruction, while moral virtue is acquired through developing good habits (doing acts that are just right) and constant practice of those good habits**. Aristotle believed that we all had the potential to be morally virtuous, but that it was something that had to be continuously worked on and practiced, reinforcing virtuous behaviors and discouraging immoral behaviors, just as a musician must constantly practice to master their skills.
4. **Aristotle goes on to postulate that the virtue of character, or moral virtue lies in the mean between two extremes of behavior: the extreme of excess (too much) and the extreme of defect or deficiency (too little)**. This mean is something that is **just right** (not excessive nor deficient). However, **just right** here for Aristotle means an act that is **right/good**, done at the **right time**, at the **right place**, for **the right reason or purpose**, to the **right person or party**. That is why Aristotle asserts that because each practical situation varies greatly, it is very difficult to the act that is “just right.” **Instead, Aristotle proposes that the right moral behavior lies in the mean between the extremes of deficiency and excess**. For example, **the virtue of courage is the in-between (or the mean) of the extremes of cowardice (deficiency) and rashness (excess)**. **Eudaimonia can be translated from ancient Greek to mean happiness**, but it also has associations with the terms **fulfillment, success and flourishing**. **Aristotle related the mean between the extremes to Eudaimonia because it is through the action of living within the moral “mean” and not extremes that leads one down the road to eudaimonia or happiness.**

Aristotle asserted that this moral “mean” is **not the same for everyone because every person and situation** is different so therefore the “mean” between extremes for every circumstance would be different. In other words, **this “mean” is relative** to the person, to the situation or to the circumstance. This “mean” is also **not absolute** or something that can be determined by applying some algebraic formula or equation.

And finally, for Aristotle, not all actions and passions have the “mean” of behaviors. Some actions do not admit of a “mean” because by their very nature they are already evil (or bad). They do not become evil because they are excessive or deficient. For example, there is no such thing as “murdering” “just right – not excessive and not deficient,” or “adultery” that is “just right – not excessive and not deficient.”