

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

Philosophy 2B, 2006-7, Dr. Bill Pollard, University of Edinburgh

Lecture 1: Introduction to Aristotle's *Ethics*

Why Study Aristotle's *Ethics*?

- Influence: on contemporary philosophy; on mediaeval philosophy (e.g. Aquinas)
- Quality of ideas: offers a distinctive and compelling approach to the subject
- Solves problems: a way out of a moral-theoretical impasse

Aristotle's Life (384-322 BC)

- Life sciences: Father was Macedonian court doctor; ¼ of surviving work on biology
- Alienation: spent most of life as an exile in Athens; can't be assumed to be naïve defender of status quo.
- Plato: Worked with Plato at the Academy in Athens for 20 years; later formed the Lyceum, home of the Peripatetics. Broad-brush distinction between transcendence of Plato's Ideas, and immanence of Aristotle's Forms.

Textual Context

- Lecture notes: 'Contents of an academic's wastepaper basket'! Also problems of multiple translations; chronology; sub-divisions (determined by rolls of papyrus?)
- Title: assumed to be after son, Nicomachus.
- NE is part of Aristotle's work on politics, from point of view of individual. Linked works include *Eudemian Ethics* and *Politics*. Overall project same as *Republic*.

Contents of NE

Book 1: Introduction and centrality of eudaimonia

Books 2-5: The practical virtues (Book 3, Ch. 1-5: Responsibility)

Book 6: The intellectual virtues

Book 7: Weakness of will; pleasure

Books 8-9: Social relationships

Book 10: Pleasure and the Good Life

Main Ideas

- A practical as opposed to theoretical goal: to help students become good (or better)
- Directed at students who already have the right upbringing, and can make good judgements; but don't yet know how to explain or justify them.
- Knowing what to do is more important than knowing why you should do it
- Generality: Conclusions only true 'for the most part'. General not universal ('human beings are generally such-and-such', not 'all human beings are such-and-such')
- Naturalism: a conception of human good as part of the natural world, rather than distinct from it (cf. Plato); though note nature is teleological for Aristotle.

Referencing Aristotle

Bekker numbers: a standard form of referencing applying to (almost) the entire corpus of Aristotle's work. They refer to line numbers in the 1831 Prussian Academy of Sciences' Greek text. They have the form: page number, a/b for first or second column, and line number. E.g. 1094a1 corresponds to page 1094, first column, line 1, which is the start of the NE. Ranges can also be specified (e.g. 1094a31-b2). Since they are independent of the particular translation, these numbers are always used when referencing Aristotle, and you should do the same.

Bibliography

Primary

Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (NE). A translation is included in Michael Morgan's collection, *Classics of Moral and Political Theory*. An online translation by Harris Rackham is available from the Perseus Digital library: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>. A commentary on Books I and II by Paula Gottlieb is available from the Project Archelagos database at www.archelegos.com

Secondary

Introductions to any translation will be useful; See also Piers Benn, *Ethics*, Ch. 7, and your *Introduction to Philosophy* notes from last year.

Then there are two good commentaries, one of which you should purchase:

G J Hughes (2001), *Aristotle on Ethics*, London, Routledge.

J O Urmson (1988), *Aristotle's Ethics*, Oxford, Blackwell.

And for greater depth consult:

A O Rorty (ed.) (1980), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, London, University of California Press.

R Hursthouse (1999), *On Virtue Ethics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press

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D Statman (ed.) (1997), *Virtue ethics*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.

D Bostock (2000), *Aristotle's Ethics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

R Kraut (ed.) (2006), *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. Blackwell.

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Lecture Schedule

1. Introduction
2. Eudaimonia
3. Practical Virtue
4. Acquiring Practical Virtue
5. Practical Wisdom
6. Responsibility
7. Weakness of Will
8. Social Relationships
9. Eudaimonia & Contemplation

Aristotle's *Ethics* Lecture 2: *Eudaimonia*

The Highest Good

Aristotle begins by working out a formal definition of *eudaimonia* as 'the highest good':

Every art and every enquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. (1094a1-3)

- A decision about what to call 'the good' (there may be other goods, but irrelevant)
- Teleology: every activity has an aim, for the sake of which we do it (is this true?)

But some things we do for the sake of something else (medical art for health; shipbuilding for the vessel; strategy for victory; economics for wealth)

If there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the highest good. (1094a18-22)

So the highest good is that which is desired for its own sake, and to which all other goods are subordinate. This Aristotle gives the name *eudaimonia*. Note at this point the notion of *eudaimonia* has form but no content: we have no idea what the highest good might be.

Note on Inclusive and Dominant Readings

A controversy about what Aristotle means by 'highest good' (for more see lecture 9):

- *An inclusive end*: the highest good incorporates everything that is worth choosing for its own sake.
- *A dominant end*: the highest good is a single end (e.g. pleasure, virtuous activity, or contemplation)

What *Eudaimonia* is Not

In Book 1 Aristotle says that whilst we generally agree that the highest good for humans is 'living well' or 'faring well', there is disagreement about what this amounts to. Aristotle considers and rejects some popular possibilities:

- *Money making*. Can't be what makes life fulfilling because we only want it because of what it can buy.
- *Pleasures*. Can't be what makes life fulfilling, since a life of pleasure seeking is only fit for beasts (cf. Mill on higher/lower pleasures).
- *Being well thought of* (as an end for political life). But you might be well thought of for the wrong reasons (contemporary e.g. celebrity itself); it's only worth being well thought of if people think well of you because you're a good person.
- *Contemplation?* Not considered until Book 10, See Lecture 9.

In Book 1 Ch. 6, Aristotle also rejects the Platonic Idea of the Good which might allow us to determine the highest good. But Aristotle rejects this because good activities are too diverse to have a common element (cf. dominant end reading), and because we can carry out activities very well without knowledge of this Idea.

The Function Argument

Intended to establish what exactly *eudaimonia* consists in. See Book 1, Chapter 7.

1. If something has a function (*ergon*), it's good depends on what it's function is (the function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre; and a good lyre-player is to do so well)
2. The sculptor, the craftsman and the lyre-player have a function, and the parts of our bodies have functions, so human beings have a function.

So,

3. The human good depends on the human function
4. The human function must involve the exercise of a distinctive power or faculty, i.e. one not shared by plants and animals, that is *reason*.
5. If something has a function, it's good is (a) to perform that function (not just to have the capacity to do so); and (b) to perform the function well, or with excellence (*aretē*, virtue).

So,

6. The human good is excellent activity of the part of the soul that has reason, i.e. it is "activity of the soul in accord with virtue, and indeed with the best and most complete virtue, if there are more virtues than one" (1098a16-20).

Questionable premises:

2. Does it follow from these other things having a function that human beings have a function?
4. Must the human function be distinctive? Why can't we share it with e.g. other animals?
5. (a) Why must something's good consist in its function being performed? (cf. the nuclear deterrent). And (b) Why must something's good be to perform its function well, rather than, say merely adequately? (cf. the vending machine; bones)

Other worries:

- Why should performing one's function well constitute a fulfilled life?
- Even if we accept the conclusion, is this a proper basis for ethics?

Reading

NE, Book 1; Hughes, Chapter 3; Urmson, Ch. 1; Broadie, Ch. 1.

Aristotle's *Ethics* Lecture 3: Practical Virtue

Two Sorts of Virtue

At the beginning of Book 2, Aristotle makes a distinction between *intellectual* and *practical* virtue:

Virtue, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and practical, intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires expertise and time), while practical virtue comes about as a result of habit (*ethos*). (1103a14-19)

(Translation note: What is termed 'practical' virtue is here often translated as 'moral' virtue. I avoid this because of connotations with goodness or rightness; at best, 'moral' should be read as pertaining to 'mores'.)

The Definition of Practical Virtue

Virtue is a state connected with choice, lying in a mean relative to us, a mean being determined by reason, and in the way in which the man of practical wisdom would determine it (Book 2, Ch. 6, 1106b36-1107a2).

State (hexis):

- not a *feeling*, because they don't determine goodness or badness;
- nor a *disposition*, which is only future-directed, and need not be exercised;
- but a *habit*. Note that since emotions are so important to Aristotle, we seem to have to say that the habit must be one not just of acting, but of feeling as well (and perhaps only contingently acting).

Q: But is this right? Cf. Hughes, who thinks an action is generous or courageous only if one has the right feelings. But can't I act virtuously without the right feelings? Indeed if I do it quite automatically, that is, without feeling, am I not showing a better character (more skilled, better practiced) than somebody who doesn't?

Choice (prohairesis).

- What lies behind each action
- Also the conclusion of practical deliberation (see lecture on Practical Wisdom)

Q: Is this compatible with the exercise of habit? Usually habit entails lack of deliberation – when we act habitually we act 'automatically'. An answer may come in book 6, when Aristotle rejects Socrates' view that virtues are 'in accordance with right reason' in favour of the view that they imply only 'the *presence* of right reason' (1144b26-7), so thinking may not actually be done.

Lying in a mean relative to us.

- The mean is *the appropriate response in a particular case* ('relative to us' registers this particularity)
- The mean is not moderation, or doing a bit of everything (indeed temperance, which is close to meaning 'moderation' is itself a virtue).
- The idea is supposed to capture the way in which the right response is neither an underreaction, nor an overreaction (emotional responses in particular are criticised on

such grounds). These correspond to the two vices of deficiency and excess that go with each virtue.

- Not to be interpreted as a criterion of right action; Aristotle is merely saying what right action consists in

A mean being determined by reason.

- More precisely, it is practical wisdom which determines the mean (see later)
- Note that this does not amount to the application of rules, but is a matter of seeing what to do in particular cases, and reasons can be given for one’s choice.

In the way in which a man of practical wisdom would determine it.

- The sole criterion for which habits count as virtuous.
- This looks utterly circular unless we have an independent fix on ‘the man of practical wisdom’ (*phronimos*).
- Remember, Aristotle is not going to provide us with precise rules of conduct here, of where virtue fades into vice, and so on.
- Nevertheless Aristotle refers us to a table of virtues and accompanying vices...

The List of Practical Virtues

Virtue	Excess	Deficiency
Courage	Rashness	Cowardice
Temperance	Licentiousness	Insensibility
Liberality	Prodigality	Illiberality
Magnificence	Vulgarity	Pettiness
Great-souledness	Vanity	Pusillanimity
Proper ambition	Ambition	Unambitiousness
Patience	Irascibility	Lack of spirit
Truthfulness	Boastfulness	Understatement
Wittiness	Buffoonery	Boorishness
Friendliness	Flattery	Surliness
Modesty	Shyness	Shamelessness
Righteous indignation	Envy	Malicious enjoyment

The list is actually found in the *Eudemian Ethics*, though is often in translations of the NE, and referred to at 1107a32. Note it excludes justice, though it appears in the text.

Aristotle does not give any argument for how virtue consists in these particular virtues. Most plausibly he is just articulating received wisdom.

Two common charges rebutted:

- *Parochialism*: counter examples draw on current received wisdom: missing virtues (justice, charity); and virtues that we don’t recognise (great-souledness). But we need not read Aristotle as presenting the list as definitive; only illustrative.
- We might also object that some virtues on Aristotle’s list aren’t recognisably ‘moral’ (wittiness), but this turns on an unfair translation, and why I prefer ‘practical’.

Reading

NE Books 2, 4 & 5; Hughes, Ch. 4; Urmson Chs. 2 & 5; Hardie Chs. 6, 7 & 10; Rorty (ed.) essays 7, 9, 10, 11 & 12. See also Gottlieb’s commentary on www.archelogos.com.

Aristotle's *Ethics* Lecture 4: Acquiring Practical Virtue

Seeing how practical virtue is acquired is important because:

- It demonstrates Aristotle's naturalistic alternative to Plato's 'recollection' account
- It shows what Aristotle's students are supposed to get from his lectures
- It tells us more about the nature of practical virtue

Recall the distinction from Book 2 between *intellectual* and *practical* virtue:

Virtue, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and practical, intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires expertise and time), while practical virtue comes about as a result of habit (*ethos*). (1103a14-19)

Stage 1: Habits

Neither by nature, nor contrary to nature do practical virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit (1103a23-25)

- So we don't have virtues 'by nature', that is, innately.
- But we can't acquire any virtue that is contrary to nature ('the stone which by nature moves downwards cannot be habituated to move upwards, not even if one tries to train it by throwing it up ten thousand times' 1103a21-3)
- Habituation is the 'perfection' of nature. How does this work?

We acquire practical virtues by *doing* (habituation):

Practical virtue we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well ... 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. (1103a31-b2)

Is there a paradox here? How can we 'exercise' a virtue we don't already have? Don't we have to begin by 'going through the motions', mimicking?

- Note that this training can also go wrong: 'men will be good or bad builders as a result of building well or badly' (1103b10-11)
- And training affects not just our acts, but our feelings: 'being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly' (1103b16-17)

Hence, Aristotle sums up:

It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather *all* the difference (1103b24-6)

Presumably, the right sorts of habits are what Aristotle assumes his students to have. But what do they lack? What, in other words, is going to be the practical benefit of attending Aristotle's lectures?

Stage 2: Practical Wisdom

Two different (though perhaps not competing) accounts of what happens next:

Hughes: dealing with complexity

- With habits alone, the students lack the ability to deal with the sorts of complex situations that arise in adult life
- It's easy to become confused when, for instance, two habitual responses seem to be in conflict (e.g. bravery and loyalty)
- It's only by being able to think about such situations that they will be able to respond appropriately: which is the role of practical wisdom.

Burnyeat: completing the process of upbringing

- First stage: The students know 'the *that*':
 - the facts about what is just and noble
 - they take pleasure in it
 - acquired by habituation

the soul of the student must first have been cultivated by means of habits for noble joy and noble hatred, like earth which is to nourish the seed. (1179b24-6)

- What they lack is 'the *because*' (+ 'the *that*' = practical wisdom)
 - to know why the noble is as it is
 - not merely take pleasure in it, but to love it for its own sake
 - acquiring 'the because':
 - knowing 'the *that*' is a prerequisite
 - also requires instruction (from the lectures?); argument; discussion; an appreciation of how the virtues are part of *Eudaimonia*; and further experience (always an ongoing process?)
 - 'we shall need laws for this as well, and generally speaking to cover the whole of life; for most people obey necessity rather than argument, and punishments rather than what is noble' (1180a3-5)
 - not immediately learned, but gradually
 - *akrasia* (doing wrong knowingly) where practical deliberation and habitual responses are out of kilter, will initially be common.
 - Further practice (instruction, etc.) will gradually reduce this, thus improving practical wisdom (will this ever come to an end?)
- The parallel between merely enjoying wine, and appreciating it as a connoisseur does.

Q: Is the acquisition of practical wisdom ever complete, or is it an ongoing project even for mature adults?

Reading

NE Book 2 (and Book 10, Ch. 9); Hughes, Ch. 4, especially pp 70-81; Urmson Chs. 2 & 5; Hardie Chs. 6, 7 & 10; Rorty (ed.) essay 5 by Burnyeat.

Aristotle's *Ethics* Lecture 5: Practical Wisdom

Phronēsis

Recall the distinction (from Book 2) between intellectual and practical virtue:

Virtue, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and practical, intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires expertise and time), while practical virtue comes about as a result of habit. (1103a14-19)

In Book 6 Aristotle makes a further distinction within the category of intellectual virtue:

- *Sophia*: being able to think well about scientific matters: theoretical wisdom
- *Phronēsis*: being able to think well about practical matters: practical wisdom

Phronēsis is distinct from other practical skills (e.g. arts and crafts)

- In arts and crafts, the point is to produce something distinct from their exercise. E.g. the practice of medicine, whose point is to produce healthy patients.
- The point of *phronēsis* isn't to 'produce' *Eudaimonia*. Rather, *Eudaimonia* consists in acting just because one sees what one does as noble and worthwhile. These actions are intrinsically good.

The possessor of *phronēsis*, then, has the capacity to perform actions of this kind.

Universals and Particulars

For Aristotle, both universals and particulars must feature in *phronēsis* (cf. Plato, whose primary concern is with the universal Good):

Practical wisdom is not only about universals: it must also recognise particulars, since it is concerned with actions, and actions are concerned with particulars. That is why some people who lack knowledge are more practical than others who have knowledge, especially if they have experience. For if someone knew that light meats are healthy, but did not know which kinds of meat are light, he would not produce health as effectively as the person who knows that chicken meat is healthy. (1141b14-20)

The reference to light meats can be illustrated with the following 'practical syllogism':¹

- P1. Light meats are healthy
- P2. This chicken meat is light
- P3. This chicken meat is healthy
- C. I eat it

Aristotle's important point here is to show how those who are experienced can be better practically than those who have knowledge (which Plato couldn't allow).

¹ Practical Syllogisms: These are supposed to illustrate how the possessor of *phronēsis* might think. They consist of a set of premises leading to a conclusion about what to do. They typically have the following form (e.g. 1141b18-20):

Major premise (universal)	Light meats are healthy
[Other premises]	This chicken meat is light
<u>Minor premise (particular)</u>	<u>This chicken meat is healthy</u>
Practical conclusion	I eat it

Interpretation: How literally are we to interpret Aristotle's use of the practical syllogism? Some possibilities: (1) the agent always has such a syllogism 'in mind' just prior to action; (2) such syllogisms can always be produced by the agent after acting; (3) counterfactually: had the agent thought about it she would have reasoned thus... (4) purely illustrative, so nothing to do with the agent's actual thought.

Contrast:

- The merely knowledgeable person: knows P1 but not P2, so can't infer P3. May have theoretical wisdom (*sophia*), but not practical wisdom: doesn't know *what* to do.
- The merely experienced person: knows P3, but not P1 or P2. Knows *what* to do but not *why*. This could be supplemented later: the purpose of the NE?

This is not to say the universal is of merely theoretical interest. In *phronēsis*, the universal and particular are inter-dependent:

- We build up our notion of what is worth aiming at, kindness, say, by exposure to particular cases of kindness. This informs and clarifies our understanding of what kindness means – the universal. Note practical universals are 'flexible and inexact'.
- Informed by this understanding, insight (*nous*) gives us the ability to see new circumstances as requiring kindness. This in turn deepens our understanding of the universal.

Means and Ends

A controversy about the scope of deliberation in practical wisdom.

Interpretation 1: Deliberation can only be about means

In Book 3, Aristotle seems to anticipate Hume (*Treatise* Bk. 3, §1) in saying that we can only deliberate about means, not ends:

We deliberate not about ends but about what contributes to ends. For a doctor does not deliberate whether he shall heal, nor an orator whether he shall convince, nor a statesman whether he shall produce law and order, nor does anyone else deliberate about his end. Having set the end they consider how and by what means they consider it is to be attained. (1112b12-16)

Presumably in *phronēsis* the end would always be *Eudaimonia*.

But does this take the art-craft analogy too literally, presupposing some given end?

Interpretation 2: Deliberation can be about means and ends

- It's true that we cannot deliberate about whether to attain *Eudaimonia*.
- But what *Eudaimonia* consists in is not given; it is always in question, both in general and in particular cases. We cannot know it in advance.
- To call *Eudaimonia* an 'end' merely records it's formal role in practical deliberation, but says nothing of it's content.
- We gradually build up a picture of what such a life is like as we live it. As we refine our practical understanding of the virtues, we refine our understanding of *Eudaimonia*.
- Deliberation can be as much about the ends as about the means: we can legitimately deliberate about what the end of *Eudaimonia* will consist in here, as well as how best to attain it. (E.g. Should I be kind or truthful here? What would each involve?)

Reading

NE Book 6 (and on means and ends Book 3, Chs. 2-4); Hughes, Ch. 5; Urmson, Ch. 6; Broadie, Ch. 4; Rorty (ed.) essays 12 and 13.

Aristotle's *Ethics* Lecture 6: Responsibility

Purposes of Aristotle's treatment in Book 3:

- theoretical: to increase our understanding of virtue, and departures from it
- moral: whether we should praise, blame, forgive or pity people
- political: to help legislators who have to decide whether to punish or honour people

He seeks to identify the conditions for one's responsibility for an action.

Willing

For Aristotle questions of responsibility are settled by determining whether an action is *hekousion* (or *akousion*) which is variously translated 'willing' ('unwilling'), 'voluntary' ('involuntary') or 'intended' ('unintended'). I follow Hughes in preferring 'willing' (and its contrary 'unwilling')

Aristotle eventually gives the following definition of willing:

the willing would seem to be that of which the moving principle is in the agent himself, he being aware of the particular circumstances of the action. (1111a23-24)

He arrives at that definition having first considered the unwilling:

Those things, then, are thought unwilling, which take place under compulsion or owing to ignorance. (1109b35-1110a1)

Here Aristotle gives two excusing conditions, compulsion or ignorance, which he further analyses:

Compulsion

Two kinds, only the first of which excuses:

- *Physical constraint*: E.g. man carried somewhere by a wind, or kidnapping.
That is compulsory of which the moving principle is outside, being a principle in which nothing is contributed by the person who acts or is acted upon (1110a1-3).
- *Duress and 'mixed' actions*: E.g. 'if a tyrant were to order one to do something base, having one's parents and children in his power', throwing goods overboard in a storm.

Now the man acts willingly; for the principle that moves the instrumental parts of the body in such actions is in him, and the things of which the moving principle is in a man himself are in his power to do or not to do. Such actions, therefore, are willing, but in the abstract perhaps unwilling; for no one would choose any such act in itself. (1110a14-19)

Aristotle insists that compulsion of the first kind does not apply to being overcome by anger or desire (contemporary e.g.'s 'red mist', 'crime of passion'):

- Passions are involved in all actions anyway
- The presence of passion does not remove responsibility for good actions

Q: Is it correct that passions can never excuse? (consider the woman who kills her abusive partner; or Zidane's headbutt which seems to have been forgiven by the French)

Ignorance

Ignorance excuses if another condition is satisfied:

Everything that is done by reason of ignorance is non-willing; it is only what produces pain and regret that is unwilling. For the man who has done something owing to ignorance, and feels not the least vexation at his action, has not acted willingly, since he did not know what he was doing, nor yet unwillingly, since he is not pained (1110b18-22)

- A three way distinction between *willing*, *unwilling* and *non-willing* actions.
- Only acts which produce pain and regret afterwards are unwilling, and hence excused.
- But the agent must still have been acting from ignorance *at the time of action*.
- Aristotle is silent on the excusability of non-willing but not unwilling actions (why?)

Whether ignorance excuses also depends on with what the agent is ignorant of:

- *Ignorance of the universal*, which never excuses

every wicked man is ignorant of what he ought to do and what he ought to abstain from, and error of this kind makes men unjust and in general bad (1110b28-29)

- *Ignorance of particulars*, which may excuse. Particulars could be:

who [the agent] is, what he is doing, what or whom he is acting on, and sometimes also what (e.g. what instrument) he is doing it with, and to what end (e.g. safety), and how he is doing it (e.g. whether gently or violently) (1111a3-5)

Q: Is it true that ignorance of the universal never excuses? (Ignorance of law cf. ignorance of moral universals, which may only be imperfectly grasped).

Responsibility for Character

A problem:

- My actions are guided by my conception of the good, which is not up to me
- My actions express my character, which is formed from early habituation and training
- So even my willing actions are not in my power; they do not originate from me

Aristotle's response:

- We are responsible for our characters, which were formed by our own earlier willing actions:

Men are themselves responsible for being unjust or self-indulgent, in that they cheat or spend their time in drinking bouts and the like; for it is activities exercised on particular objects that make the corresponding character. (1114a4-7)

Q: Is this response adequate?

- Acts of habituation in childhood are not willing
- Adults perhaps have some control over characters, by re-training.
- But childhood conditioning of desires may be impossible to alter (recall Bk. 2)
- What about the role of reason and the desire for good ends?

Reading

NE Book 3, Chs. 1-5; Hughes, Ch. 6; Urmson, Ch. 4; Broadie, Ch. 3; Rorty (ed) essay 8.

Aristotle's *Ethics* Lecture 7: Weakness of Will

Purposes of Aristotle's treatment in Book 7:

- theoretical: to complete the picture of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) as harmony between intellect and passions
- political: to help legislators, parents and educators

The topic also has enduring philosophical interest, due to the apparent paradox.

Akrasia

- Translations: 'weakness of will', 'incontinence', 'unrestraint', 'lack of self-control'. A state to be avoided
- *Akrasia's* contrary: *enkrateia* or 'strength of will', 'continence'
- *Akrasia* occurs when we do wrong knowingly, typically as a result of some passion (*pathos*) such as anger or pleasure.

Background

Socrates:

- 'nobody does wrong knowingly'; wrong action must always be from ignorance
- Virtue is knowledge; vice is ignorance
- *Akrasia* is impossible (apparent *akrasia* to be explained away: ignorance/non-action)

Plato:

- Agrees virtue is knowledge
- You can't act against knowledge, which is of the form of the Good.
- But allows you can act against mere opinion
- *Akrasia* still impossible

Aristotle

- Rejects Socrates' view because 'it contradicts the plain phenomena' (1145b27).
- Insists we can act against what we know to be right, because we are held responsible for doing so. Hence we must do so willingly, and so also in *some* sense knowingly.
- (Note if 'knowingly' is here construed straightforwardly, we hold a contradiction, that it is right to Φ and it is not right to Φ)
- The key to Aristotle's account is to identify senses in which we act 'knowingly' and at the same time 'not knowingly', which he does in Ch. 3 of Book 7.

Senses of 'Knowingly'

- Knowledge vs. mere opinion: Aristotle denies there is less of a problem if we say *akrasia* involves opinion rather than knowledge (cf. Plato).
- Merely knowing (being able to mouth the words) vs. actually using or exercising it (bearing it in mind). Aristotle thinks *akrasia* has something to do with this.
- Particular vs. Universal knowledge. Aristotle claims only particular, not universal, knowledge is involved in *akrasia*

there is nothing to prevent a man's having both and acting against his knowledge, provided he is using only the universal and not the particular; for it is the particular acts that have to be done. (1147a1-3)

Aristotle illustrates this with a practical syllogism:

Dry food is good for everyone
such and such food is dry
this food is such and such
So eat it (1147a5-6; simplified)

whether this food is such and such, of this the *akratic* man either has not or is not exercising the knowledge.

Note, however, that Aristotle also gives a practical syllogism for *akratic* action:

Everything sweet must be tasted
This is sweet
So taste this (1147a29-31; simplified)

So a failure in knowledge of the particular is not sufficient for characterising *akrasia*.

- Aristotle identifies further senses in which we can both 'know' and 'not know':
 - somebody asleep, drunk or mad
 - someone overcome by strong feelings
 - you know what you've been told, but haven't assimilated it
 - an actor knows his lines

Aristotle's Solution

(Or at least a solution which applies to *some* cases of *akratic* action).

It is plain, then, that *akratic* people must be said to be in a similar condition to [men asleep, mad or drunk] (1147a17-18)

When appetite happens to be present in us, the one opinion bids us avoid the object, but appetite leads us towards it ... ; so that it turns out that a man behaves *akratically* under the influence (in a sense) of reason and opinion, and of opinion not contrary to itself, but only incidentally – for the appetite is contrary not the opinion – to right reason. (1147a34-b3)

- There is no contradiction between two competing practical syllogisms.
- Appetite (mis)leads us to focus on the wrong one, and we fail to notice the right one.
- This is a *perceptual* failure: we act on what we see as knowledge, but it is not:

Now, the last premise both being an opinion about a perceptible object, and being what determines our actions, this a man either has not when he is in the state of passion, or has in the sense in which having knowledge did not mean knowing but only talking, as a drunken man may utter the verses of Empedocles. (1147b9-12)

This account allows Aristotle to offer the following concession to Socrates:

The position Socrates sought to establish actually seems to result; for it is not what is thought to be knowledge proper that the passions overcomes (nor is it this that is dragged about as a result of the passion), but perceptual knowledge.

Reading

NE Book 7, Chs. 1-10; Hughes, Ch. 7; Urmson, Chs. 7; Broadie, Ch. 5; Rorty (ed.) essays 14 and 15.

Aristotle's *Ethics* Lecture 8: Social Relationships

Aristotle's view of humanity is that it is naturally social: 'man is a political [i.e. city dwelling] animal' (*Politics*, 1253a2; cf. 1097b11, 1169b18-19)

Books 8 and 9 cover social relationships, which for Aristotle are essential:

Without friends, no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods (1155a5)

those in the prime of life [friendship] stimulates to noble actions – 'two going together' – for with friends men are more able to both think and to act. (1155a15-16)

They also seem to be part of the good life:

Friendship is not only necessary but noble; for we praise those who love their friends, and it is thought to be a fine thing to have many friends; and again we think it is the same people that are good men and are friends (1155a29-31)

Kinds of Relationship

Strictly speaking, Aristotle is not only concerned with friendship, but a broader class of relationship, thought they all involve mutual goodwill (ruling out relationships with inanimate things)

He identifies three kinds, corresponding to three possible objects of love and desire:

1. *Pleasure*: love for the sake of the pleasure to oneself
2. *Utility*: love for the sake of what is good for oneself
3. *Goodness*: based on admiration of the intrinsic qualities of the other

For Aristotle, relationships of goodness are the best and most perfect kind of relationship. Why does Aristotle think this?

- 1 and 2 tend to be short-lived, since someone might stop being fun to be with, good looking, or stop being useful, etc.
- 3 tend to endure, since they are based on admirable characteristics, which tend to endure.

Relationships of goodness:

- can only exist between people of equal status (he rules out father-son, ruler-subject and very controversially, husband-wife! – we needn't do the same).
- are what we might recognise as 'friendship proper', as opposed to mere acquaintance or association.

A Problem

Don't we (at least sometimes) love a friend for themselves, not for their goodness? Don't we love them first, and then through that love discover new goods?

A Solution:

- Proper friendship needs time and intimacy (1156b25-28).
- Friendship can certainly expand our appreciation of what is good.
- But there is a connection between the values discovered through a friend and the friendship's continuation.
- Unless we come to see the friend's character as good, the friendship is unlikely to endure (we may feel sorry for a former friend who does something we see to be bad, but not friendship)

Another solution: Reject the terms of the problem

- There is simply no distinction between who the friend is, and their character and values.
- The self *just is* one's character (and similarly extended across a lifetime). What else is there to it, after all? Couldn't Aristotle accept this?
- So to reject a friend is to reject their character and values, and *vice versa*.
- There are going to be difficulties with parts of character here (love their generosity but not their cowardice), but that's just how ambivalent friendship can be.

Does *Eudaimonia* Require Friends?

- We have already seen that the acquisition of practical wisdom requires discussion and argument, essentially mutual social activities. Why should we do this with friends?
- The key: 'We are better able to observe the lives of our friends than ourselves' (1169b33-5). (We know the habits of those near and dear very well).
- So most obviously, we can model our own life on those of our friends.
- What's more, by reflecting on the lives of friends we get a better understanding of our own practical life, and hence improved practical wisdom, a better understanding of what constitutes *Eudaimonia*. This is a mutual process.
- And in friendship, the values and life of theoretical reason become part of everyday practical and social life (1171b32-1172a14); practical life itself is the object of contemplation (*theōria*) (but see next lecture for doubts about this).

Reading

Hughes, Ch. 8; Urmson, Ch. 9; Hardie, Ch. 15; Rorty (ed.) essays 17, and 20 (esp. §3)

Aristotle's *Ethics* Lecture 9: *Eudaimonia* & Contemplation

Recall from lecture 2 the controversy about what *Eudaimonia* consists in:

- *An inclusive end*: the highest good incorporates everything that is worth choosing for its own sake.
- *A dominant end*: the highest good is a single end.

Contemplation as the Dominant End

Textual evidence from Books 1 and 10, and especially Book 10, Chs. 7 and 8, seems to indicate that Aristotle holds this view, and the dominant end is contemplation (*theōria*)

In Book 10, Ch. 7 Aristotle claims that contemplation is (amongst other things):

- the activity of the intellect, which 'is the most divine element in us' (1177a16). A reference to his conception of God as 'pure thought' (1178b22).
- the best activity 'since not only is intellect the best thing in us, but the objects of intellect are the best of knowable objects' (1177a20-1)
- the most continuous activity 'since we can contemplate truth more continuously than we can do anything' (1177a21-3)
- the most pleasant 'philosophy is thought to offer pleasures marvellous for their purity and their enduringness' (1177a25-6)
- the most self-sufficient: 'For while a wise man, as well as a just man and the rest, needs the necessities of life, when they are sufficiently equipped with things of that sort the just man needs people towards whom and with whom he shall act justly ... but the wise man, even when by himself, can contemplate truth, and the better the wiser he is' (1177a28-34)
- loved for its own sake 'for nothing arises from it apart from the contemplating, while from practical activities we gain more or less apart from the action' (1177b1-3)
- the most leisurely '*Eudaimonia* is thought to depend on leisure; for we are busy that we may have leisure' (1177b4-5)
- proper to man (recapitulating the function argument): 'that which is proper to each thing is by nature best and most pleasant for each thing; for man, therefore, the life according to intellect is best and most pleasant, since intellect more than anything else is man. This life therefore is also the most *eudaimon*.' (1178a5-8)

Further, in Ch. 8 Aristotle says: 'in a secondary degree the life in accordance with the other kind of excellence (practical wisdom?) is *eudaimon*; for the activities in accordance with this befit our human estate' (1178a9-10). This is the life of practical and political engagement which is familiar from elsewhere in the NE.

The Inclusive View

According to this view *eudaimonia* includes everything that is worth choosing for its own sake. So this will include all the activities of virtue that Aristotle articulates in Books 2-9. We are courageous, practically wise, and so on, 'for the sake of' *eudaimonia*, which means that they are all parts of the all-inclusive package.

- Fits well with the position articulated in Books 2-9.
- May be more defensible
 - philosophically: pluralism is always easier to defend than a unitary account, and especially a unitary account with such an intellectualist bias
 - morally: an engaged practical life is better than a solitary contemplative one; it certainly does more good, for example.
 - politically: the striving for self-sufficiency relies on others to meet our needs; and who is to do that for the great philosopher I wonder?
- But it's hard to reconcile it with Book 10:
 - If *theōria* really is the highest good, the most we can claim for practical life is that it is a means to this end (and it may not in fact even be that – to be a good thinker, the best practice will be to think, presumably).
 - What's more, practical activities cannot be done 'for their own sake' after all.

Q: Is this just a contradiction in Aristotle's account? Here are a couple of suggested solutions which avoid disputing the provenance of the unified text.

Solution 1

Contemplation is a necessary part of the *eudaimon* life, because it requires us not just to live well practically, but also to understand what we are doing as such. So the *eudaimon* life consists in a bit of practice, and a bit of contemplation. This is at least Aristotelian in spirit. (Rorty, Hughes)

But:

- No direct textual support
- Contemplation is done 'for its own sake', so not even to gain understanding
- Contemplation is of 'objects of the intellect', i.e. eternal truths, not generalisations which are only true 'for the most part'
- In sum, places *theōria* too close to *phronēsis*.

Solution 2

Contemplation is still practical, and is a 'celebration' of our unique divine nature, our intellect. Time for this is gained at the completion of practical virtue, i.e. in leisure time. So contemplation completes the practical life. (Broadie)

But:

- Again it reads between the lines
- Celebrations must have an object, the thing celebrated (birthday, end of exams); we don't 'just celebrate'. But contemplation is done 'for its own sake'.
- Contemplation is incompatible with practical activity, because it requires different virtues (*theōria* vs. *phronēsis*); and a different environment (solitary retreat vs. city)

Reading

Hughes, Ch. 3; Urmsom, Chs. 1 & 10; Hardie, Chs. 2 & 16; Broadie, Ch. 7; Rorty (ed.) essays 1, 2 and 20.