

## 24.01 Classics of Western Philosophy

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### II. Aristotle

#### Lecture 7. Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*

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Book I: 1097a-1098a.

1. *Aristotle asks: what is the chief good? What is the ultimate end of human life?*

Aristotle takes these questions to be the same; and he argues that there must be such a chief good, and such an end, on pain of a regress:

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 that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good, and the chief good. (1094a:20)

He gives the answer, 'Happiness' or *eudaimonia*. This answer makes Aristotle a kind of *hedonist*, albeit rather a distinctive one. Note that 'happiness' or *eudaimonia* is closer to the idea of 'flourishing' than the idea of 'pleasure': compare it with the flourishing of a plant or an animal.

2. *Happiness is the only thing aimed at purely for its own sake.* Happiness has a unique status among ends. Happiness is the only thing aimed for purely as an end, and not also as a means or instrument to other things: it is the only 'complete' end. Some ends (e.g. wealth, musical instruments) are chosen as means to some other end. Happiness is the one complete end. What of intelligence, honour, pleasure? They too are chosen partly as ends, for their own sake (unlike wealth), but also as means to something else—e.g. intelligence is viewed not only for its own sake but also as means to happiness. But according to Aristotle, nobody chooses happiness as a means to anything else: it is always chosen for its own sake, as an end.

3. *Happiness, by itself, makes life worth living.* Here Aristotle brings in another consideration to support the conclusion that happiness is the chief good. The perfect good is *self-sufficient*:

The self-sufficient we now define as that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing; and such we think happiness to be. (1097b:18)

Note he has in mind not just a solitary life, but a social one, including friends and family, 'for man is by nature a social being'.

4. *The good as an end, and the good as self-sufficient.* Happiness is the *end* to which actions are directed, and *sufficient* to make life worth living. Aristotle claims that the thing we value only as an end, for its own sake, is also the thing that is a self-sufficient good (in modern parlance: it has intrinsic value). While Aristotle thinks these go together, they do not need to. One idea has to do with our attitudes to

something: do we value it for its own sake, or not? The other has to do with the nature of goodness: is it good on its own, 'in isolation', or does it depend for its goodness on something else? In principle the thing we value as an end might lack intrinsic or 'self-sufficient' value; and we might fail to value as an end the thing that has intrinsic 'self-sufficient' value.

5. '*What is happiness?*'. An answer to this question can be found through the idea of a *function*. We have already seen how Aristotle uses the notion of a function to understand the nature of a living human being; now it is being put to work to discover what is good for the living human being.

...to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account of what it is still desired. This might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function of man. For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or any artist, and in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function. (1097b: 23)

The function of a thing determines not only what that thing is, but what makes it a good version of that thing. The function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre; and a good lyre player will play it well. Is there a function for human beings as such? If there is, that could help tell us what is the good for us.

6. *Comparison with other living things*. Human beings have a number of functions: as living beings they fulfill functions of nutrition, growth, locomotion, sentience (perception). These are shared by plants and animals. What is our *proper* function, i.e. the function distinctive of human beings? Answer: 'A practical life of the rational part', 'an active life of the element that has a rational principle'.

7. *The proper function of human beings*. If the good, generally, lies in fulfilling one's proper function well (whether the function of a plant, an eye, a flutist), i.e. the function distinctive of, unique to, the kind of thing it is, then the function of man 'is an activity...of the soul, in accordance with a rational principle'; the good for man is thus 'an activity of soul in accordance with excellence', i.e. virtue. (1097a15-1098a8).

8. *The structure of Aristotle's argument*. We want to know: what is the good for human beings? The argument from the nature of ends, and the nature of self-sufficient good, tells us that the good for human beings is happiness. The function argument tells us that the good for human beings is an activity of soul in accordance with a rational principle. These are not competing accounts of the good for human beings: rather, we are learning *what happiness is*: happiness is an activity of soul in accordance with a rational principle. Happiness lies in *performing our human function well*. On this account, happiness and virtue are one and the same.

9. *One swallow does not make a summer* (1098a: 17). Happiness is not something of a moment, or an instant, but proceeds from a steady disposition of character.

Next time: *Nicomachean Ethics* Book II.