

24.01 Classics of Western Philosophy
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II. Aristotle

Lecture 8. Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*

1. *Reminder. What is the good for human beings?* First answer: happiness, because that is the only thing we aim at for its own sake—the only ‘complete end’; and because that is the only self-sufficient good, which, on its own, makes life worth living. Second answer: an activity of the soul in accordance with excellence, since that is how human beings fulfill their proper function well. Putting these together: happiness is an activity of the soul in accordance with excellence.

2. *Excellence, or virtue, is acquired through habit.* Moral excellence is contrasted with natural abilities such as vision, which we have even before we exercise them. In the case of moral excellence, we learn by doing (1103a: 30): ‘in one word, states arise out of like activities’:

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 (1103a: 30)

3. *Virtue involves knowledge, choice and character.* What matters for a work of art or music is just that it have a certain quality, we don’t need to know what the artist thought; but when it comes to virtue, what matters is not just what the action is, but how it was done, and what the agent was like:

The agent also must be in a certain condition when he does [the acts]; 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.

4. *The virtuous man provides the standard of virtue.* Aristotle says we tell whether an act or agent is virtuous by measuring it against what the virtuous person would do. Note how an unjust or intemperate man may perform just and temperate actions.

Actions, then are called just and temperate when they are such as the just or the temperate man would do; but it is not the man who does these that is just and temperate; but the man who also does them as just and temperate men do them.

5. *Virtue and the mean, or intermediate.* Most virtues occupy an intermediate position between a vice of excess and a vice of deficiency: courage occupies the mean between over-confidence and cowardice; temperance occupies a mean between self-indulgence and ‘insensibility’; liberality, or generosity, occupies a mean between meanness and prodigality.

6. *Is happiness a self-sufficient good?* Our response to this question might depend on what we take happiness to be. Suppose we were to take happiness to amount to *pleasurable experience*. In a famous thought experiment, Robert Nozick asks whether you would choose life in an ‘experience machine’, capable of giving you endless pleasurable experiences. Why not? What else, after all, can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside? Nozick argues that no matter how happy the experiences are, you would not (or should not?) choose such a life.¹ What matters in addition to our experiences are that we want to *do* certain things, not just have the experiences of doing them; and we want to *be* a certain sort of person, not an indeterminate experiencing blob. Now Aristotle does not identify happiness with pleasurable experience. And he would, I think, agree with Nozick. Life in an experience machine involves no *doing*: it is not a life that involves any action or dispositions for action—though again, it make have actions’ counterfeits. Virtue is always activity, a doing, not a passive experience. Moreover there is no room in an experience machine for *character*, for being a certain sort of person. Finally, life in an experience machine is a *solitary* life, one that does not include ‘parents, wife and children, friends and fellow-citizens in general’—though of course it may include their simulacra, if that is what you want!

7. *Is happiness a complete end?* Suppose we accept, for sake of argument, that happiness is a self-sufficient good, which, on its own, makes life worth living. What connection is there between that claim, and the claim that we treat it as a complete end? Nathaniel Hawthorne said, ‘Happiness is as a butterfly, which when pursued, is always beyond our grasp, but which, if you will sit down quietly, may alight upon you’. Many philosophers have remarked on this *paradox of hedonism*. Mill said this about happiness, in his autobiography,

I now thought that this end was only to be attained by not making it the direct end. Those only are happy (I thought) who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness[....] Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness along the way[....] Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so.²

If there is a paradox of hedonism, that suggests a tension between happiness being an end, and its being a self-sufficient good: if it is a good that goes away when you aim for it, you shouldn’t aim for it.

8. *Why does ‘proper function’ matter?* First, how does *ability* (what you are *able* to do) imply *function* (what your *purpose* is)? Second, why should function be identified with *proper*, i.e. function, i.e. function unique to human beings? What if there had been other rational animals, and the capacity which distinguished ourselves from them were, for example, that human beings were better than them at baseball; or art; or warfare. Would they then be our ‘function’ because they are the abilities ‘proper’ to us? Or (real life example), does women’s distinctive ability to have children show that is women’s function? Aristotle would have welcomed this conclusion. (See e.g. Aristotle’s *Politics* 1260a)

(Next time: Descartes, *Meditations*, the First Meditation.)

¹Nozick, ‘The Experience Machine’, in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (N.Y.: Basic Books, 1974).

² John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* in *The Harvard Classics*, Vol. 25, Charles Eliot Norton, ed. (New York: P. F. Collier & Son Company, 1909)