

Class Thirteen - Aristotle's *Ethics*, Book I

Philosophical Perspectives - Ryan Simonelli

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1 Aristotle and the *Nicomachean Ethics*

- **Aristotle – Some Biographical Facts:**

- Lived from 384BC (16 years after the death of Socrates) to 322BC.
- Unlike Socrates and Plato, wasn't born in Athens, but, rather, in Macedonia and had close ties with Macedonian royalty.
 - * His father, Nicomachus (which will also be the name of his son), was the doctor of King Amyntas III, who will end up being the grandfather of Alexander the Great.
- Learned about biology from his father—they would dissect animals together—and this scientific, empirically-oriented approach that he acquired from childhood would have huge impact on his philosophy.
- Moved to Athens at the age of seventeen and was a student of Plato's Academy for twenty years, until the age of thirty-seven.
 - * Some of Plato's later dialogues might have been influenced by debates with Aristotle during this period.
- Left Athens around the time of Plato's death, possibly because he expected to become head of Plato's academy but it was instead left to Plato's nephew.
- Traveled around a bit before going back to Macedonia (in 343BC) to tutor Phillip II's (the son of Amyntas III) son, Alexander (who'd eventually be "the Great").
- Eventually returns to Athens in 335BC to establish his own school, the Lyceum, where most of his major works were recorded (either written as lecture notes by Aristotle himself
- These works that we have of Aristotle's are not actually what he intended as his finished philosophical products.
 - * Aristotle actually wrote dialogues just like Plato, but, sadly, these have all been lost.

- **Aristotle – Some Philosophical Facts:**

- Was a systematic philosopher and scientist whose work spanned literally all areas of inquiry from anatomy and astronomy to ethics and metaphysics.
 - * The word "metaphysics" comes from the name of his work, the *Metaphysics*, which wasn't a name he gave it but was given by editors, presumably to indicate that it was to be read after or that it goes beyond his other work, the *Physics*.
- The same basic philosophical principles animate all of his works, and the works form an interconnected, unified picture, often making reference to various other works.
- One fundamental difference between Aristotle and his teacher Plato is famously pictorially summed up Rafael's "School of Athens":



- * Whereas Plato is pointing *up*, above the sensible world to the intellectual realm that lies above, Aristotle's is motioning *at ground level*, to the sensible world which they actually stand.
- * Whereas Plato uses *one finger*, apparently pointing to a *single* form (the Good), Aristotle is motioning with his *whole hand*, apparently references at the *plurality* of different aspects of reality populating the sensible realm.
- * This is, to be sure, a bit of a caricature, but it's not a *mere* caricature—there's quite a bit of truth in it.
- **The Nicomachean Ethics:**
 - Actually one of two "Ethics" of Aristotle.
 - * There's also the earlier *Eudemian Ethics*, named after Eudemis of Rhodes, who edited it, which shares a lot of content with the *Nicomachean Ethics*.
 - * The *Nicomachean Ethics* is generally regarded as the more definitive work, and when people refer to Aristotle's "Ethics," this is generally what they're referring to.
 - Nicomachus is the son of Aristotle, and the book is presumably dedicated to him (hence the name).
 - Contains Aristotle's principle inquiry into the human good.

2 The Aim of the Inquiry

- **The Good as the Aim of All Things:** Every art, activity, and action aims at some good. The good just is that at which all things aim.
 - This is essentially just a conceptual point. Activities have a *point*, an *end*, something that they aim to accomplish or bring about, and what we call "the good" just is that at which arts, activities, and actions aim.
 - * **Question:** What about eating cake at 1am?
 - Insofar as this activity is intelligible to us, there is *some* good at which it aims, presumably pleasure. It's just that there's a higher good, health and genuine flourishing with which the pursuit of this good, in this case, is at odds.
- **Ordering Relations Among Goods:** Though all things aim at some good, many goods are subordinate to other goods.
 - For instance, dentistry aims at tooth health. Toothpaste-making, whose direct aim is the product of toothpaste also mediately aims at tooth health. Dermatology aims at skin health. And all of these goods that these activities aim at are subordinate to the higher good of *health*.
- **The Chief Human Good:**
 - This will be the good to which all other human goods (such as health) are subordinate.
 - The chief human good will be the good that that we aim to achieve *for its own sake*.
- **Politics** is the science that aims to comprehend the human good.
 - Knowing what the human good *is* will enable us to better orient our actions and activities towards it so as to achieve it.

3 The Many Senses of "Good"

- **Aristotle's Critique of Plato:** Aristotle takes it that there is something that is *the human good*, and there can be a science of this thing (politics), but there's no such thing that just is *the good*, as Plato thought.
 - **The Basic Observation:** "Good" is said in many ways of many different kinds of things:

- * "The 2014 Honda Civic is a good car."
- * "This bottle opener is not very good."
- * "Wholefoods has good produce."
- * "Goose is a good cat."
- * "Ian Anderson is a good flute player."
- * "Keanu Reeves seems like a good person."
- * "Betty White lived a good life."
- * "Self-restraint is a good quality to have"
- * "Drinking soda every day is not good for you."
- * "Light blue would be a good color for the bathroom."

Aristotle's Question to Plato: Is it really plausible that we're saying exactly the same thing in each of these cases, namely, relating the thing that we're calling "good" to this single idea: the Good?

Aristotle's Answer: No! These uses of good don't all have the same sense. Still, it's not mere homonymy (like a river "bank" and a "bank" with money). Rather, these uses are systematically related and we have to look at the various senses in which we use "good" in order to understand their relation.

- **The Example of Health:** There are lots of things that we say are healthy. For instance:
 - A healthy diet.
 - A healthy urine sample.
 - A healthy person.
- These are all systematically related to a *core* use of "health," applied to the healthy person. E.g. healthy diet is *conducive* to the health of a person and healthy urine is *indicative* of the health of a person. The person, on the other hand, is simply *healthy*. So the primary sense of "health" applies to persons, and other senses of "healthy" can be understood in relation to this sense.
- **The Primary Sense of Good as Activity in Accordance with Function:** A thing of a certain sort is *good*, given the sort of thing that is, if it does what it's supposed to be doing, once again, given the sort of thing that it is.
 - **Artifacts:** A bottle opener is meant to open bottles, so a bottle opener is *good* if it's good at opening bottles.
 - **People Playing Specialized Roles:** A good flute-player is good, considered as a flute player, insofar as they play the flute well.
 - **Living Things, Considered as Such:** For living things, considered as such, we don't consider their function to be something that's *external* to their activity (their living a life) but *intrinsic* to it:
 - * **Plants:** For something to be a good tree is for it to do well at being a tree, to live the sort of life trees live well: soaking up nutrients from the ground, putting these nutrients to work in growing, and so on.
 - * **Animals:** For something to be a good tiger (the phrase is a bit odd) is for it to do well at being a tiger, to live the sort of life that a tiger lives well: hunting prey, finding a mate, caring for its young, and so on.
 - * **Humans:** For someone to be a good human is for one to do well at being a human: to live the sort of life that that humans live well. *But what is that?*

4 The Human Good

- **Two Questions (that are really one):**
 - **Question One:** What is the sort of activity such that doing it amounts to doing well at being a human, living a good human life?

- **Question Two:** What is it at which human activity aims such that, if one achieves this aim, one has done well at being a human, having lived a good human life?
- **Answer to Question Two:** Everyone agrees: *happiness* or (human) *flourishing*. Though saying this doesn't say, substantively, what happiness/flourishing actually *amounts to*.
 - **Note on the translation:** the Greek word that gets translated by Ross as "happiness" here is *Eudemonia*.
 - * "Happiness" is not a *bad* translation, but we have to strip our sense of term of our contemporary thought that happiness is a kind of *feeling*.
 - The fundamental difference between our contemporary sense of "happiness" and Aristotle's comes out in the fact that he says that children can't be "happy." If he's saying this, then, clearly, he means something quite different than we do.
 - * A different translation that has been proposed is "flourishing," and something like this gets more at the sense of the term. Though we have to clarify that it's distinctively *human* flourishing we're talking about here.
 - * I'll stick with Ross's translation, but keep reminding yourself that it's not "happiness" in our contemporary sense.
- **The End is Not External to the Activity:** A Tiger's flourishing as a tiger is nothing other than its living the sort of life that tigers live well. Likewise, happiness or human flourishing is nothing other than one's living the sort of life that humans live well.
- **A More Substantive Characterization:** The human good, happiness, is nothing but "activity of the soul exhibiting virtue." That is, the good, for humans, is living virtuously.
- **Our Task:** We still need to say *what it is* to live virtuously.