

Class Fourteen - Aristotle's *Ethics*, Book II

Philosophical Perspectives - Ryan Simonelli

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1 Quick Recap

- **The Point of the Ethics:** To articulate the human good in such a way that understanding the good will be actually useful in guiding action.
- **The Human Good:** The human good is happiness or flourishing, which is living life in accordance with virtue.
- **The Analogy to Other Final Goods:** The human good is the final good for a specific sort of living thing (rational animals), and it can be understood by analogy to the final goods of other sorts living things, which are all those things living the sort of life that things of that sort are meant to live.
 - **Plants:** Plants, who have the capacity for nutrition and reproduction, live a good plant life by actualizing these capacities to flourish.
 - **Animals:** Animals, who have the capacity for perception and action (which is how they eat and reproduce), live a good animal life by actualizing these capacities to flourish.
 - **Humans:** Human beings are *rational animals*. We are capable of reasoning about the things we perceive and acting in virtue of reasons. The good life, for a human, just is a life in which human activity is guided by reason.
- **The Task:** Say what it is to live virtuously.
- **Different Kinds of Virtue:** We can distinguish between *intellectual* virtues, like scientific and philosophical knowledge and practical and political wisdom, and *moral* virtues, like courage and temperance.

2 The Acquisition and Nature of Moral Virtue

- **Contrast with Intellectual Virtue:** Intellectual virtue comes about by *teaching*, whereas moral virtue comes about by reinforced *habit*.
 - It seems clear that a certain kind of teaching is still involved in the development of moral virtue, but it's not like teaching math. Rather, it's a sort of reinforcement of correct action.
- **Neither by Nature nor Contrary to Nature:** Virtue is neither innate, possessed simply by nature, nor contrary to nature.
 - Compare a stone that falls downward by nature. It can't be "habituated" to fall upward—that's just not what stones do. But also, it doesn't make sense to speak of it as "habituated" to fall downward—no habituation is needed.

We are, by nature, *such as to be habituated to be virtuous*, but we are not, by nature *virtuous*.

- Compare the ability to speak a language. We don't speak a language by nature, but our nature is not opposed to our speaking a language. On the contrary, we are, by nature, *such as to be able to acquire a language*.

- **Acquisition by Doing:** Consider how one acquires the ability to play the piano. Clearly, the only way to learn how to play the piano is *by* playing the piano. One acquires skills by *practicing* them. Likewise, one acquires the virtues by acting in accordance with them.
 - **Example:** Consider, bravery, specifically with respect to surfing big waves.
 - * When I first started surfing, I was afraid to surf in even four foot waves.
 - * In order to acquire bravery in surfing big waves, I had to actually surf them.
 - * By “practicing bravery,” surfing big waves when swells came around, I became brave.
 - But not rash! I wouldn’t surf a 20 foot swell.
- **Moral Virtues are States of Characters:** Moral virtues are not *passions* or *capacities*, but *states* or *dispositions* (*hexeis*) of character.
 - Not passions, since we don’t praise or blame someone for feeling fear or anger. Rather, we praise or blame them for disposed to act in certain way with respect to their feelings of fear or anger.
 - Not capacities (to feel the passions) either. Such capacities are innate, and the virtues are habituated.
- **Question:** Can bad habits be unlearned? Can good habits be lost?

3 The Doctrine of the Mean

- **Moderation is Key!** In Aristotle’s terms, the good of something generally lies between excess and defect:
 - Consider the activity of eating.
 - * Eating is, in general, good and conducive to health. However . . .
 - * If one eats too little, this will be destructive of health (one will starve).
 - * On the other hand, if one eats way too much, this is also destructive to health.
 - * So, the good of eating lies in between defect and excess.
 - Likewise with exercise.
 - Also, consider that “we often say of good works of art that it is not possible either to take away or to add anything, implying that excess and defect destroy the goodness of works of art, while the mean preserves it,” (1106b, 10-12).
 - **The Means Might be Different for Different People:** An “mean” that determines how much one should eat for an athlete will be different from someone who lives a more seditary lifestyle.
 - **Some Examples of Moral Virtue as the Mean:** Aristotle gives us several examples of moral virtues that are the means between two vices. Here’s a fe:
 - **Courage:** Too much confidence and fearlessness amounts to *rashness*, whereas too little amounts to *cowardice*.
 - **Temperance:** Too much pleasure is *self-indulgence*. Too little doesn’t have a name; Aristotle calls it “insensibility.”
 - * **Question:** Can we think of an actual case in which “insensibility” is really a vice?
 - **Liberality:** Liberality is the mean of spending habits, where the extremes are *prodigality* and *meanness* (or excessive frugality).
 - **Question:** Aren’t there some cases where some types of behavior are just good?
 - Aristotle does consider some cases where some actions (e.g. adultery, theft, murder) are simply bad, not in virtue of excess or defect.
 - “Nor does the goodness or badness of such things depend on committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, in the right way, but simply to do any of them is to go wrong,” (1107a, 15).
- But can we make a similar point about some good actions?