

# Class Fifteen - Aristotle's *Ethics*, Book VI

Philosophical Perspectives - Ryan Simonelli

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## 1 Quick Recap and Context

- **Book I:** Considered the aim of the *Ethics* is to articulate the human good—flourishing or happiness—which is nothing other than living in accordance with virtue.
- **Book II:** Developed Aristotle's basic account of moral virtues—dispositions to act in ways that are neither
- **The Books We Didn't Read:** There's not really anything you need to have gotten from the books we skipped over in order to get what's going on here, but here's what happened:
  - **Book III:** Developed an account of voluntary and involuntary action and choice.
    - \* Voluntary action is acting from one's own power.
    - \* Involuntary action is action produced by an external power.
    - \* Choice is voluntary action that is the product of deliberation.
  - **Book IV:** Developed more detailed accounts of specific moral virtue, following the general ideas laid out in Book II.
  - **Book V:** Developed an account of justice.
- **Book VI:** Considers the intellectual virtues. These divide into two (or three, depending on how you count) basic types.
  - **Virtues of Theoretical Reason:** Intellectual activities that aim at comprehending truths about things "whose originative causes are invariable."
    - \* Science.
    - \* Philosophy.
  - **Virtues of Productive and Practical Reason:** Intellectual activities that aim at *making* things or *doing* things, and so whose domain is the changeable.
    - \* Art.
    - \* Practical wisdom (*phronesis*).

## 2 Virtues of Theoretical Reason

- **Scientific Knowledge:** A capacity to demonstrate, establishing specifics from known general principles concerning the "invariable originative causes" of things.
  - **Of Necessities:** The "object of scientific knowledge is of necessity," (1139b, 23).
    - \* Science investigates the essences, natures, and fundamental principles of things.
    - \* Though the things themselves change, their essences and principles don't.
    - \* Science is concerned with the unchanging, necessary principles that account for the various aspects of the changing physical world we experience.
  - **Involves Demonstration:** Aristotle says that scientific knowledge is "a state of capacity to demonstrate."

- \* Imagine yourself in a science class and you ask why something's the case. A good teacher, with scientific knowledge, will be able to answer your question, explaining, in terms of general principles, why what you're asking about is indeed so.
- **Ultimately Relies on Intuitive Principles:** Since every demonstration must proceed from more basic and certain to less, scientific knowledge ultimately relies on intuitive principles that are not themselves demonstrable.
  - \* These intuitive principles include things like the principle of non-contradiction.
  - \* They less includes abstract things like general basic principles of things that become apparent by considering examples.
    - *Example:* Living things aim to preserve themselves. This is not something deduced by the biological sciences, but, rather, a foundational principle on which the biological sciences are based.
- **Philosophical Knowledge:** Understanding of the intuitive principles that underlie scientific knowledge as well as knowledge of the highest objects of scientific knowledge.
  - **Things Higher than Humans:** The talk of "highest" here is actually interchangeable with talk of "most divine," since the highest thing are most like *the* highest thing, the prime mover. Humans are more divine than animals, but the heavenly bodies are more divine than humans.
  - **Completed Scientific Knowledge:** In effect, philosophical knowledge is nothing other than scientific knowledge that achieves its completion.
    - \* Lower things can be comprehended philosophically but the philosophical comprehension of them understands them in relation to the higher.
- **A General Agreement with Plato with Some Important Points of Contrast:** Recall Plato's claim that the we don't really have knowledge of changing things. Aristotle essentially agrees here, with some qualifications:
  - **No "Two Worlds" Thesis:** The things of which we have knowledge aren't in some other, higher, invisible realm, but are the unchanging general principles and natures that explain the activity of the things we perceive.
    - \* These principles aren't somewhere else, like Plato's forms, but are *at work in the very things we see*.
  - **No Hard Line Between Scientific and Philosophical Understanding:** Recall, in the *Phaedo*, Socrates contrasted philosophical knowledge of why things are how they are with scientific knowledge. For instance:
    - \* **Philosophical Explanation:** Giraffes are tall because they participate in tallness.
    - \* **Scientific Explanation:** Giraffes are tall because they evolved to be able reach leaves on tall trees.

For Aristotle there's no such contrast.
  - **We Still Reason about Changeable Things, just Not Theoretically:** Though we don't have theoretical knowledge of changing things, we still reason about them. In particular, we reason about our own actions and products, and what could such things be if not changeable?

### 3 Virtues of Productive and Practical Reason

- **Artistic Knowledge:** A capacity to make things well, producing objects on the basis of reasoning how they are to be made.
  - Distinct from practical knowledge, since making and acting are distinct.
  - "Art" here is not just "fine art," but also (and more centrally), the *crafts*, for instance, carpentry.

- **Practical Wisdom:** A capacity take to act well in the particular situations in which you find yourself—taking the right means towards the right ends.
  - **Distinct from Philosophical Wisdom:** Along several dimensions:
    - \* Philosophical wisdom concerns the *eternal* and *necessary*, whereas practical wisdom concerns the *changing* and *contingent*.
    - \* Philosophical wisdom concerns the most *divine*, whereas practical wisdom concerns distinctively *human* affairs.
    - \* Philosophical wisdom is *theoretical*, issuing in *judgment*, whereas practical wisdom is *practical*, issuing in *action*.
  - **Distinct from Political Wisdom:** Political wisdom involves understanding the general principles of good government, whereas practical wisdom, as it bears in politics, involves the specific “legislative wisdom” to actually take the means to achieve good political structure, given the specifics of the actual political situation.
    - \* This, once again, contrasts with Plato, who thinks that philosophical knowledge will enable one to best rule the city.
  - **Distinct from Cleverness:** The mere capacity to do means-end reasoning well is a *necessary* but not *sufficient* condition of practical wisdom.
    - \* A vicious person might be very good at taking the right means to achieve their bad ends, but they’re not practically wise, in Aristotle’s sense—merely “clever.”
  - **Distinct from Moral Virtue:** Alternately, being morally virtuous is a *necessary* but not *sufficient* condition for being practically wise.
    - \* We’re all familiar with the case of someone who “means well,” but doesn’t actually *do* well. They’re morally virtuous, but they don’t exercise the respective moral virtues optimally in the particular situations in which they actually find themselves. That’s essentially another way of saying that they’re not good at taking the means to the good ends that they have in virtue of being morally virtuous.
  - **A Potential Puzzle:** Aristotle is clear that practical wisdom implies moral virtuousness. He also says, however, that there’s an implication in the other direction: true moral virtuousness implies practical wisdom. What’s the deal?
    - \* Though there’s a sense in which one can be morally virtuous (in the sense of always “meaning well” without being practically wise, moral virtue is really only *fully realized* in the practically wise person: “it is not possible to be good *in the strict sense* [my italics] without practical wisdom, (1144b 31).
  - **Who Is the Practically Wise Person?:** A practically wise person is, essentially, the sort of person you go to for advice when you find yourself in a tricky situation in life. They know what sort of outcomes are to be aimed at, but, moreover, they know how to actually achieve those outcomes, given the specific circumstances.
  - **Question:** What does it take to be practically wise?
    - \* Aristotle is clear that, while a child might be theoretically wise in various respects (for instance, having a really good understanding of math), they can’t be practically wise, since acquiring practical wisdom requires experience in many different types of real-world circumstances.
    - \* Can anyone, in principle, become practically wise? Or is it only the select few, as Plato would have thought?
      - Suppose it’s the latter. Then, given that practical wisdom is required to realize the virtuous life, which is just the happy life, can only the select few be happy?