

**Aristotle**  
(Odette)

### **Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics**

-An inquiry into the nature of the good life/human happiness (eudaimonia) for human beings. Happiness is fulfilling the natural function toward which a being is directed (similar wording to Plato's justice?). The assumption of an end or telos.

-What is human (specifically, uniquely): reason/intellect. So the end/happiness of all humans is activity of the soul according to reason. (though also spirited, desiring parts)

-Ethical virtue "is a habit disposed toward action by deliberate choice, being at the mean relative to us [in each situation], and defined by reason as a prudent man would define it." (prudence as the intellectual virtue by which an individual can determine the mean in each situation)

- Bravery, courage (M between rashness and cowardice), action for what is noble

- Temperance (M wrt. bodily pleasures): desiring/reasoning parts in harmony

- Generosity (M between wastefulness and stinginess)

- Munificence (M: meanness/ostentation): large amounts for suitable occasions

- Magnanimity: deserve and claim great honors

- Honor/right ambition

- Good temper (M between irascibility and bitterness)

- Also: friendliness, truthfulness, wit – which involves listening/speaking well

(NB. Not absolute, but always in relation to other people)

NB. All of these exist on a continuum – the specific point depends on the situation.

#### *Justice:*

- (Larger sense) unites and orders all the virtues (and is a virtue itself)

- Specific sense: concerned with property, honor, safety, etc.

- Distributive justice: Giving to each what they are due – giving equality to equals and inequality to unequals (Politics) – acting according to merit. Of course, what merit *is* at each point requires human judgment. Justice, too exists on a continuum, and is dependent on circumstances (exists on a continuum between two extremes of unfairness).

- Natural/universal justice vs. conventional justice: lawmaker should rule in spirit of the law and the intention of the lawmaker, if particular law is not appropriate at a particular time.

Man's highest/happiest life: A life of contemplation of the good, as man's highest capacity is that of rational contemplation, and his highest happiness resides in the use of that capacity. Many men, though, are not virtuous, so good laws and proper education must be enforced to make people act virtuously and train their passions in line with reason.

### *Ramifications:*

-The good, virtuous, or just is specific to each situation, so moral choice is a matter of judgment – not a matter of universal mathematical form or truth. (So Aristotle calls Plato an idealist.)

-Also, there is a plurality of goods (including good health, money, political office, etc.) – philosophical virtue is not the only reward. So, there is a distributive question in Aristotle: he generally thinks that the virtuous should have the good, but this is not always the case. (For Plato: philosophical virtue needs no other reward, it is its own good).

So we move to....

### **Aristotle's Politics**

(A good political set up will be one that corresponds to Aristotle's account of the best life: living nobly and according to virtue)

NB. Man is a political animal, because he has the ability to dialogue about justice and the good, and also because he requires partnerships for self-sufficiency. Therefore the city is prior to the complete individual.

-NB. We form cities for self-sufficiency, but they exist for the sake of living well.

And now for the best city: Recall, morality is a judgment; there are no definite positions as it is always provisional. The particular situation is key for moral choice, so it is difficult to extract general principles.

If morality, justice, and virtue depend on judgment, then the best political regimes should not constrain judgment and choice. Therefore, a science of politics cannot be committed to any given structure or distribution of goods, as these would constrain choice and judgment in the political realm.

What then is the ultimate structure of politics?

-The regime must be as inclusive and open-ended as possible

(critiques Socrates' ideal republic, binding self to a single structure)

-So... 'Politics' maybe doesn't give a political theory but a meta-political theory, suggesting that particular political forms are best constructed for particular communities.

-The importance of deliberation, speech, taking all views into account, and choice.

-Aristotle is for 'constitutional politics' – a system of government that brings all parts of society in, allows for a range of participation, is as flexible as possible, and doesn't structurally exclude any 'free' groups. ('free' an important caveat)

-Relatedly, political rule is rule among those who are 'similar in stock and free.'

-The citizen is one who has a share in ruling the city. (Draws from his emphasis on politics as deliberative interaction to determine the just.)

-Correct regimes seek to judge/determine what is in the common (not partial) advantage.

(On particular points:)

### *(Political) Virtue\**

Political virtue is had by a man of practical wisdom, who can balance positions, understand a situation, and make well-judged decisions (not based on absolute criteria).

-Want a political structure that:

- Fosters rule of men of practical wisdom

- Won't bind cities to a particular structure

- Allows deliberation of all considerations (though those with practical wisdom can sum up all views of the assembly and make decisions accordingly – ie. Pericles)

-In the best city, the virtuous man and the best citizen will coincide (though this is practically not always the case in every regime).

-How do you cultivate the virtuous man? Education should be common to all citizens (letters, gymnastics, drawing, and music – the latter makes students appreciate the harmony of the soul, in which reason rules the spirit and the desires).

### *Monarchy*

-Claims that rule by one preeminently virtuous man, who can truly take every viewpoint into account and make a rational judgment couldn't be denied; similarly for oligarchy and a preeminently virtuous group (Bk. III). (prevents rule by partial groups)

(note: Pericles. Link to Alexander – also relevant for discussion of slavery.)

### *Democracy*

(Yes, in theory)

-Critical of rule by one group in society, as this limits viewpoints

-Better if everyone can offer thoughts, and deliberate: a defense of democracy?

- vs. Hobbes, Rousseau, who are critical of deliberation and approach the Roman model)

(But in practice)

-Often becomes rule by the poor, not rule of many (linguistic ambiguity of 'demos') – so this can end up being another partial rule. (ie. in Athens, 1290b; Greek notion that democracy is class-based)

-Democracy based on equality of numbers, and freedom to do what one wants. But this practically means that all actions are equally good, and steps away from virtue/free rational judgment of the just as the end of politics.

### *On Freedom\**

-Freedom is moral choice free from necessity

(A person is free when they can make decisions that could be otherwise; they can be guided exclusively by reason/virtue and not by necessity.)

(NB. the Greek cities Aristotle lived in had few free people – is he a democrat?)

-Recall: politics shouldn't exclude 'free' groups – but may presumably exclude the 'unfree' to best guarantee judgment according to reason and virtue.

-Want the rule of equal *free* men, as only they can be truly virtuous and noble. So rulers come from the leisure classes (the younger are citizen-soldiers, the older rule).

So who is not free...? (On the political, domestic, economic levels) – Those who do not have the leisure to be well-educated and live nobly; those who deal with the necessities of consumption: slaves/laborers, women.

### *(1) Slaves: On Natural slavery and Just War (!)*

-There are natural slaves – those who can perceive reason but do not have access to it: they are unfree and unfit for politics.

-Argues against sophists, who say that slavery is just an arbitrary occurrence, the outcome of losing a battle. (nb. doesn't address modern 'principled' argument against natural slavery).

-For those who are natural slaves, slavery is both natural and advantageous, as it is natural for the soul to rule the body.

-There is also slavery according to the law, which may be unjust as not all conquered peoples are natural slaves.

### *(The Tuck argument)*

-The art of war is a natural art of acquisition, which we ought to practice against men who are intended by nature to be governed but will not submit; a war of this kind is naturally just. (1256b) – A war is just when it makes slaves of those who should naturally be slaves.

(nb. How would you know a natural slave when you saw one? Natural and conventional slaves are in practice the same thing – one reading)

-Power and virtue seem to go together.

-‘Goodness’ is displayed in its practice – which requires skill/power in an area

(ie. man of practical wisdom & men display virtue in rational/deliberative skill)

-A clear example of virtue is the capacity to enslave others. You are necessarily morally superior to those you justly enslave.

(2) *Women: On the Family/Household*

-The household arises from master-slave partnership and marital partnership.

-NB. The wife is ruled as political rule (rule according to reason by equals); she does not have access to authority but does have reason, and should be educated.

(3) *The Poor/Demos*

-Recall Aristotle's critique of democracy in practice as partial rule by the poor, which hinders true deliberation and moral judgment.

-In Aristotle's best regime, he simply eliminates the demos. All workers become slaves – so his society is one of slaves and leisurely aristocrats who can attain virtue and reason.

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Why must anyone be a 'slave'? (natural slaves, women)

(*The public/private split?*) -Remember, this is because the best regime should be ruled by those 'similar in stock and free', and freedom is moral choice free from necessity. So someone must deal with the realm of necessity – the private realm: dealing with matters of the body and consumption, consideration of which interfere with the deliberation of reason/virtue. So... it seems that the best human life exists only in the public/political realm. Freedom, politics, and the public realm rest on the possession of private property, but considerations of private affairs/property must not be allowed to taint rational public discourse.

*More Practically: Equality, Justice, and Regime Type*

-Oligarchs: believe that because the poor are unequal in wealth, they are also inferior in general. Democrats (equality on the basis of number, not merit): think that because all are equally free, all are equal generally. Each of the regimes is based on a particular view of justice, and as such they all reflect a partial truth about political life.

-Justice means giving equal measures to equals and unequal measures to unequals.

-So take the most just aspects of each regime and allow each part of the city to rule that area in which it is best suited for rule (ie. people over legislature, aristocracy over other areas). This will be a combination of oligarchy and democracy and would probably be the best regime type: a polity.

-The importance of the 'middling element' or middle class: they will offer a moderating point (the mean!) between the wealthy and the poor, and a large middle class is important for a stable society.

-Six types of regimes, based on form and rightness of rule. Aristotle considers the various laws that would be most appropriate for regime type, and offers a justification for political theory: "Aristotle recognizes that the best regime really only exists in theory, but speculating about it and trying to determine its laws, structure, and underlying principles is worthwhile because it provides a model by which one can judge other regimes in see which regime is the best possible in a given situation."

-Revolution: a change in regime (no notion of progress, no understanding of 'counterrevolution'). Revolutions are best avoided by educating the ruling classes, so that they most clearly see and can incorporate claims of justice from all viewpoints.

*Some Critiques of Plato:*

- Critiques general/universal understanding of the good, right, just
- Critiques rule by one group/perspective (and presumably 'totalitarian education,' etc.)
- Critiques view of ideal city/utopia. (There is plurality in politics.)
- Critiques having property/women in common: Argues that the city is not a unified household. A plurality holding things in common may cause conflict because of a possible sense of injustice. People care better for what is their own, and property allows them to practice the virtues of generosity and moderation
- Argues: Happiness cannot exist in the whole if it does not exist in its separate parts.

## Questions:

- Conceptions of justice in the Republic, and what do the non-Socratic conceptions have in common with this?
- Is it always rational to seek power? I said no, look to writings of Augustine and others for piety, Aristotle and Plato for virtue, etc.
- The spectrum between a single absolute good and a multiplicity of goods.
- Also she emphasizes the continuity of discourse (Krause)
- Plato and Aristotle: Can you separate the just man and the just society?
- Next, she linked Arendt to Aristotle by asking in which way Arendt was Aristotelian. The rest of the Aristotle discussion was not quite as I had expected it to be. What I remember is that it included a discussion of the types of activities.
- She also asked me how I would defend A's notion that politics is a necessary ingredient for the good life - or explain it if I did not feel like defending it - to undergrads.
- Aristotle: Discuss the following:
  - Relationship between public and private
  - Relationship between nature and convention
  - Discuss the above with examples of slavery, property, family.
  - (Based on my discussion) Is there any private left in Aristotle?
- We moved on to discuss the elements of Aristotle's critique of Plato, and wound up talking about the best citizen vs. the best man
- He then asked me to discuss either Plato, Aristotle, or Augustine on religion and citizenship.
- If civic and political life is so important for Aristotle, how come he doesn't talk about it in the Ethics--or does he? That had me stumped although in retrospect obviously numerous things could have been cited. But he gave me the answer he was looking for I think, which was "courage" as a virtue, and asked what was good about courage for Aristotle and what courage conferred on the courageous person that was good.

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