

The Elements of Virtue

PHIL 210 — Living a Good Life
October 3, 2022

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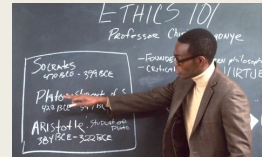
RECAP

- Aristotle contra Plato
- The good life: actualizing our potential
- Happiness (*eudaimonia*) as the final end

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Recap: Happiness as the Final End

good life / final end / *eudaimonia*



an end that's inclusive and explanatory and informative

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Recap: Happiness as the Final End

Happiness for us

- a subjective sense
- feeling of well-being
- cheery disposition



Happiness as *eudaimonia*

- an assessment of one's life
- the exercise of well-being
- "human flourishing"

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Recap: Feeling Happy vs. Being Happy



feeling happy
~~eudaimonia~~



eudaimonia ✓
feeling happy ✓

} the good life
for Aristotle

“I was happy, I just didn’t realize I was.”

– Mickey in *Hannah and Her Sisters*

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The Pursuit of (Aristotelian) Happiness

▪ Possible candidates for the human good (NE I.5)

- ~~the life of pleasure~~ → “characteristic of grazing cattle”
- ~~the life of politics/honor~~ → “seems to be in the hands of the honorers more than of the honoree”
- ~~the life of moneymaking~~ → “wealth is clearly not the good we are looking for, since it is useful and for the sake of something else”
- the life of contemplation → maybe? (see NE X.6–8) 🤔



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The Pursuit of (Aristotelian) Happiness

- What the human good is not (NE I.5)

- ~~the life of pleasure~~
- ~~the life of politics/honor~~
- ~~the life of moneymaking~~

- What the human good is:

HAPPINESS
(*eudaimonia*)

- distinctively human
- something that we achieve
- an end we pursue always and only for its own sake
- requires activity

“But to say that happiness is the best good is perhaps to say something that is apparently commonplace, and we still need a clearer statement of what it is. Maybe, then, this would come about if the function (*ergon*) of a human being were grasped.” (NE I.7)

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OVERVIEW FOR TODAY

- Happiness as rational activity in accordance with virtue: Aristotle’s “function argument”
- The need for politics
- How do we become virtuous?
- Aristotle’s “particularist” approach to ethics
- The elements of virtue
- Challenges for Aristotle’s view

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Aristotle's Function Argument (NE I.7)

1. The good of something lies in its distinctive function (*ergon*; also: "work")
2. The highest good of something lies in it performing its function well
3. There is such a thing as the human function
4. The good of a human being lies in the human function (from 1 & 3)
 - Sub-argument: what's the human function?

growth and nutrition



sense perception



reason



5. The human function lies in rational activity

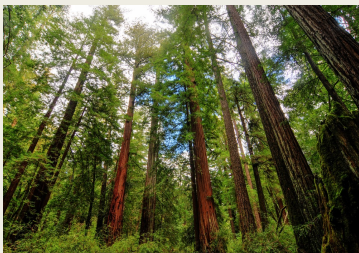
Therefore: The highest human good lies in rational activity performed well (from 2, 4, 5)

HAPPINESS
(*eudaimonia*)

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Aristotle's Function Argument (NE I.7)

What's the human function? — what kind of "work" (*ergon*) do we characteristically engage in?



power of growth and nutrition



power of sense perception



power of reason

So: happiness (*eudaimonia*) = rational activity performed well/excellently

with *aretē* }
with virtue } ?

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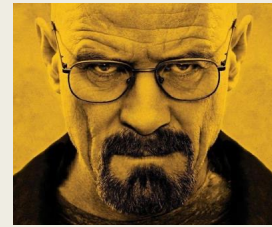
Reason and Virtue

Aristotle's account of happiness (*eudaimonia*):

rational activity performed well

? ←

→ in accordance with virtue?



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Reason and Virtue

Aristotle's account of happiness (*eudaimonia*):

rational activity performed well

? ←

→ in accordance with virtue?

- connected with our status as political animals
 - animals whose lives, beliefs, and values are informed by our activities in societies
 - animals who engage with one another in shared pursuits and commitments
 - animals whose social activity is shaped by the roles we take on in our lives
 - requires the giving and taking of reasons
- "Virtues are social skills. To possess a virtue is to have extended and refined one's abilities to perceive morally relevant information so that one is fully responsive to the local sociomoral context."

(Haidt and Joseph, "The Moral Mind," 2008)



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Name a role that you identify with

Start the presentation to see live content. For screen share software, share the entire screen. Get help at pollev.com/app

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Virtues: Ancient and Modern

acceptance
courage
forgiveness
generosity
gratitude
honesty
integrity
justice

kindness
loyalty
moderation/self-control
patience
reliability
respect
trust
wisdom

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The Fragility of the Good Life

“All the same, it [happiness = *eudaimonia*] apparently needs external goods to be added, as we said, since it is impossible or not easy to do fine things without resources. For just as we perform many actions by means of instruments, we perform many by means of friends, wealth, and political power” (NE I.8 1099a–b).

- We need “external goods” (e.g., friends, wealth, political power) to live well
- But the pursuit of virtue still has priority over the pursuit of all external goods
 - if you don’t use external goods well, you’ll won’t live well
 - goal is to treat friends justly, use wealth moderately, employ political rights wisely



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The Need for Politics

- Need for good political leaders/laws/institutions
- Living a good life depends on living in a good society
- Self-work and sociopolitical work go hand in hand



“So since our predecessors have left the subject of legislation unexamined, it is presumably better if we ourselves investigate it and indeed constitutions generally, so that as far as possible our philosophy of human affairs may be brought to completion” (NE X.9, 1181b).



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Socrates, Plato, Aristotle on Virtue



Socrates' view: we all desire what's good for us

- virtue's a kind of knowledge (of what's good for us)



Plato's view: we can know what's good for us and still be conflicted

- virtue requires shaping one's desires
- but this is still primarily an intellectual process (requiring dialogue, etc.)

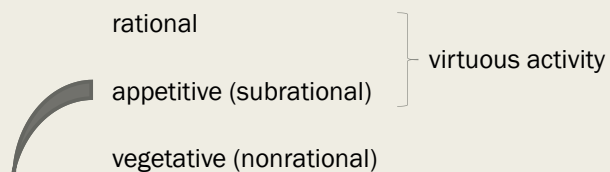


Aristotle's view: more like Plato's but with greater emphasis on action

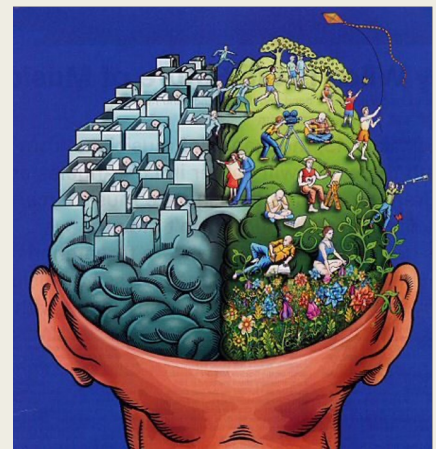
- virtue as a state of character that's trained
- requires habituation

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Aristotle on the Human Soul



"Another natural constituent of the soul, however, also seems to be nonrational, although it shares in reason in a way. ... Apparently, then, the nonrational part is also twofold, since the vegetative part does not share in reason in any way but the appetitive part (indeed, the desiring part as a whole) does so in some way, because it is able to listen to reason and obey it" (NE I.13).



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How to be Virtuous

- Virtue's acquired through practice, like a craft
- Needs to be turned into a sort of habit, arising from a stable state of character

“Hence the virtues come about in us neither by nature nor against nature, rather we are naturally receptive of them and are brought to completion through habit” (NE II.1).

- On this view, we can train our desires
- Virtuous person is disposed to act in the proper way to the various situations they encounter by avoiding excess and deficiency in their actions and in their feelings (NE II.2)
- And not at isolated moments, but in a complete life

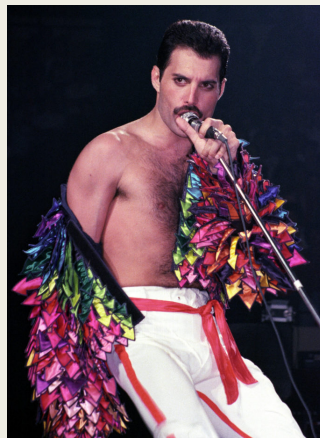
“I’d like to be known as ‘the Big Aristotle.’ It was Aristotle who said excellence is not a singular act, but a habit.”

– Shaquille O’Neal



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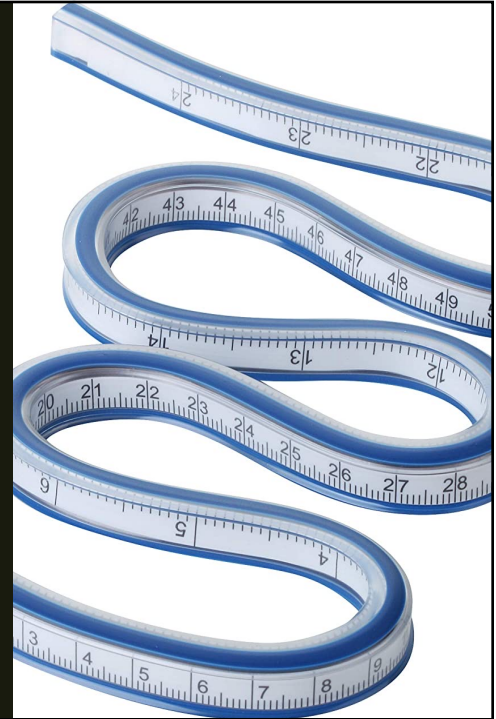
“Practice Makes Perfect”



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The Imprecision of Ethics

- Ethics isn't concerned with prescribing universal rules or principles (*NE II.2*)
- Each situation calls for a particular response: we need a flexible ruler (*NE V.10*)
- So the virtuous person must be sensitive to various contexts and circumstances
- Requires a certain perceptual capacity to discern the right response
- Worries
 - Too imprecise?
 - What's the test of virtuous action?



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Criteria for Virtuous Action

1. Pleasure (*NE II.3*)
2. Doctrine of the mean (*NE II.6*)
3. Voluntary action (*NE III.1–2*)

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Importance of Pleasure and Pain



- A virtuous person should like acting virtuously: actions aren't enough
- "Virtue of character is concerned with pleasures and pains" (NE II.3 1104b)
- Is this a hedonistic approach to ethics?
 - No: one test of a formed habit of virtue is whether you take pleasure in acting virtuously
- Recall Aristotle's view of the soul
 - We can train our desires so that we take pleasure in acting virtuously

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"Practice Makes Perfect"

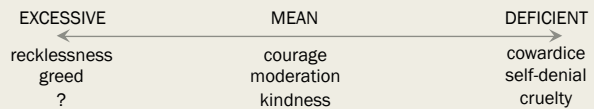


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Doctrine of the Mean



- “Virtue, then, is a mean, insofar as it aims at what is intermediate” (NE II.6 1106b)



- Compare with medicine
 - health in patient dependent on type of patient
 - treatment lies between extremes
- Or compare with art
 - beauty in art dependent on medium
 - can't take anything away or add anything without damaging the art

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Volition



- Importance of volition: action that's produced from within a person and which they are responsible for, i.e., not coerced or forced (NE III.1 1110a)
- Involuntary action (coercion or force) is an action that has an external principle, whereas voluntary action has a principle that's within the person
- Notice that animals and children on this view have volition, since they have desires
- So further step: virtuous actions result from decision and deliberation (NE III.2)

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Fulfilling our Function

- ✓ 1. Pleasure (*NE II.3*)
- ✓ 2. Doctrine of the mean (*NE II.6*)
- ✓ 3. Voluntary action (*NE III.1–2*)

+ practical wisdom (*phronēsis*; see *NE VI.7*)

“Further, our function is completed in accord with practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) and virtue of character. For virtue makes the target correct, and practical wisdom what furthers it” (*NE VI.12*).

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“We look brave,” said Frog.

“Yes, but are we?”

asked Toad.

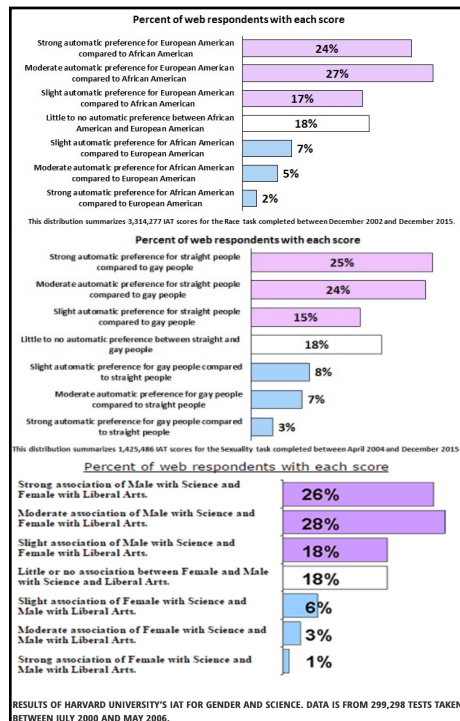
Friendship in a Good Life

- “Friendship” (*philia*) covers a range of relationships
 - family relations
 - business relations
 - peer relations
 - etc.
- Three types of friendship
 - utility-friendships
 - pleasure-friendships
 - virtue-friendships

} self-serving

→ love another person for their own sake (though you also get utility and pleasure)
- Connection between friendship and justice
 - consequences for politics

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Blindspots/Challenges

- Aristotle's sexism

"A different form of friendship, however, is the one in accord with superiority—for example, of a father for his son, of older for younger generally, of man for woman, and of any sort of ruler for someone he rules" (*NE* VIII.7).

- Aristotle's elitism

"For ruling and being ruled are not only necessary, they are also advantageous, and some things are set apart straight from birth, some to rule, others to be ruled" (*Politics* I.5).

- Theoretical challenges for Aristotle's ethics

- the power of unconscious attitudes
- solutions?

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- Recap
- Coming up
 - Live Like an Aristotelian week
 - Wednesday Breakout Sessions

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