

Aristotle on the Human Good

PHIL 210 – Living a Good Life
September 25, 2023

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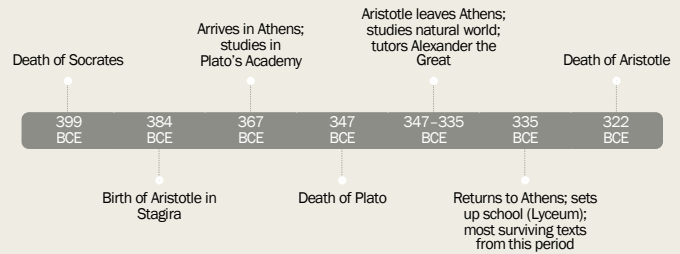
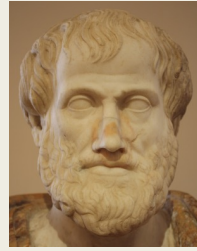
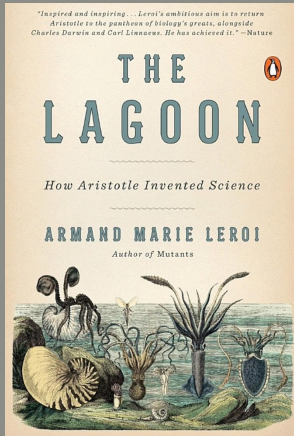
OVERVIEW

- Historical background
- A primer on Greco-Roman ethics
- Aristotle contra Plato
- Happiness (*eudaimonia*) as the highest good
- Aristotle on the pursuit of happiness
- Happiness as rational activity in accordance with virtue

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Aristotle in his Time and Place



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Greco-Roman Ethics



- Clarify the nature of the good life
- Not: moral laws and principles
- Determine ethical action from the inside out

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Living Well ≠ Living Ethically



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Living Well = Living Ethically



- “virtue” = *aretē*
 - courage
 - generosity
 - integrity
 - justice
 - moderation
 - etc.
- also: “excellence”
 - any character trait that enables a person to live well

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Living Well = Living Ethically



- Plato
 - good life = life of justice
- Stoics
 - virtue is the only good
- Epicureans
 - life of pleasure requires virtue

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Moral Psychology



- What motivates us?
 - in moral matters
 - in non-moral matters



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Plato on the Form of the Good



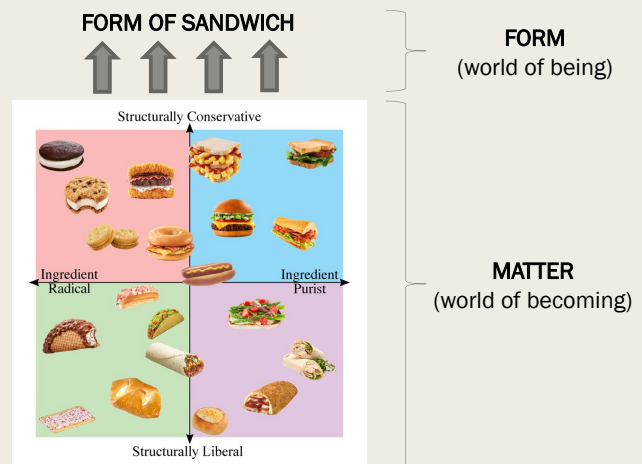
“... that which gives truth to the things known and the power to know to the knower is the form of the good. And though it is the cause of knowledge and truth, it is also an object of knowledge. Both knowledge and truth are beautiful things, but the good is other and more beautiful than they.”

– Republic 508d-509e

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Some Metaphysics

- Plato: matter vs. form
 - form is independent of and (logically) prior to matter
 - forms are timeless
 - we access forms through reasoning rather than sense experience
 - material things are explained by their relationship to the forms in which they participate



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Some Metaphysics

- Plato: matter vs. form
- Aristotle: matter and form
 - hylomorphism
 - from Greek *hulē* + *morphē*
- Matter and form represent different paradigms in understanding the world
 - matter represents potentially what the form represents actually



MATTER
(still becoming)

↓

process of **change**

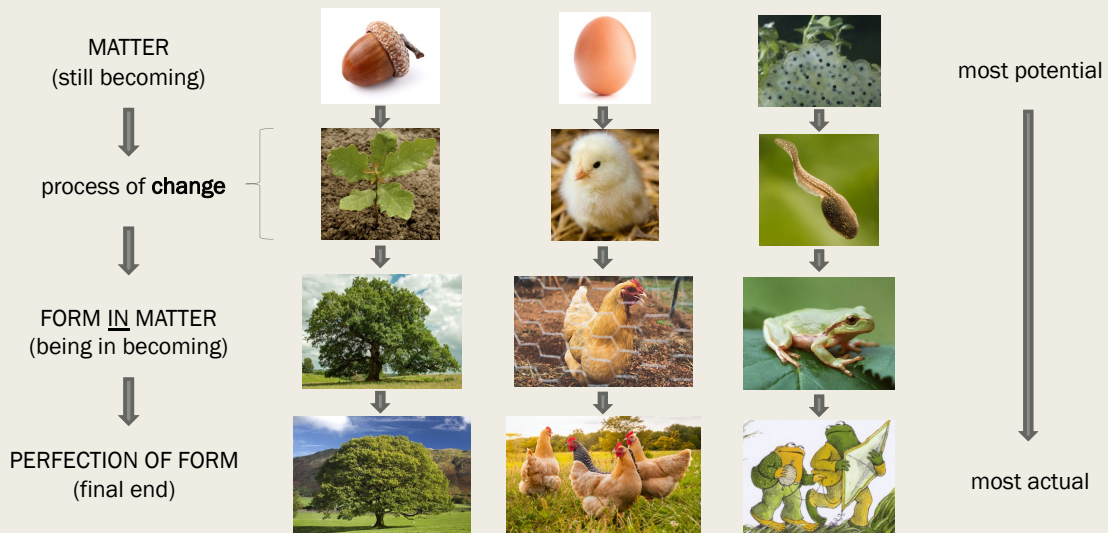
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FORM IN MATTER
(being in becoming)

Matter : Form :: Potentiality : Actuality

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From Metaphysics to the Good Life

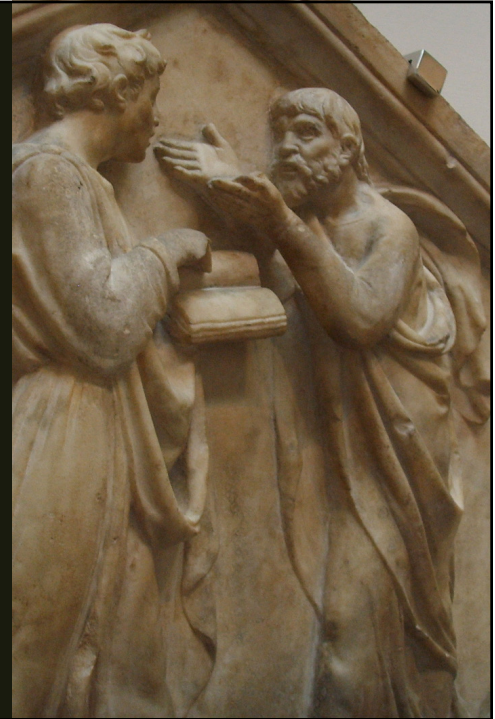


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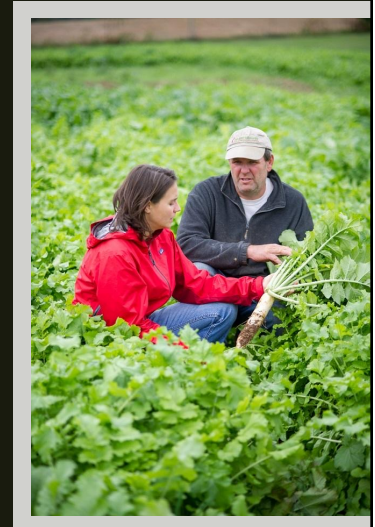
Aristotle's Response to Plato

Against a "Form of the Good" (NE I.6)

- there's no "form of the good," only the human good
- to understand the human good, study the form of life (*psuchē*; also: "soul") that's distinctive of human living
- figure out how to perfect this form of life
- what human potentiality do we need to actualize in living a good life?
- this is the project of the *Nicomachean Ethics*



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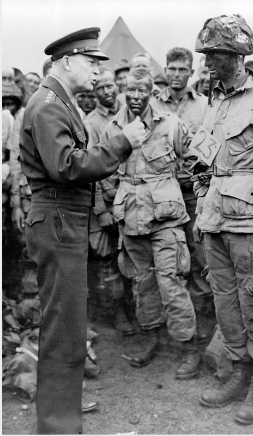


What kinds of creatures are we?

- Humans are end-seeking animals
 - we seek ends for ourselves that we believe are good
- Question: is there a chief good or final end (*telos* = ultimate goal) that makes sense of all of our end-seeking behavior?
 - achieving this would represent the actualization of our human nature

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A Sketch of the Human Good



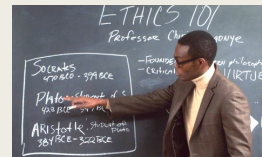
- What's the final end (ultimate goal) of a human life?
 - to live well (*eu zēn*); to do well (*eu prattein*)
- But what does living well mean for us?
 - an end (*telos*; also: goal/purpose) of an activity is always some good
 - something we regard as beneficial for us to do/obtain
 - to achieve our ends is to actualize our potential
 - simple answer to living well in trees: one set of goods
 - but for humans, there are lots of goods (recall desire maps)
 - Aristotle is looking for a chief good: an end justifying all our activities
 - and the same end for every human being!
- Consider, e.g., the general's chief good
 - ➡ victory ➡ political status ➡ power ➡ final end = ?

Is there really just one final end for all human lives?

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Happiness as the Final End

good life / final end / *eudaimonia*



“About its name, most people are pretty much agreed, since both ordinary people and sophisticated ones say it is ‘happiness’ (*eudaimonia*) and suppose that living well (*eu zēn*) and doing well (*eu prattein*) are the same as being happy (*eudaimonein*).” (NE I.4)

“Happiness (*eudaimonia*) seems to be most like this, since it we always choose because of itself and never because of something else.” (NE I.7)

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Happiness as the Final End

good life / final end / *eudaimonia*



an end that's inclusive and explanatory and informative

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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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Feeling Happy vs. Being Happy



feeling happy
eudaimonia



eudaimonia
feeling happy

“I was happy, I just didn’t realize I was.”
– Mickey in *Hannah and Her Sisters*

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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 *eudaimonia* (NE I.5)
 - the life of pleasure
 - the life of politics
 - the life of moneymaking
 - the life of contemplation
- } ?

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In your view, which of the following comes closest to being the good life?

- life of pleasure
- life of politics
- life of moneymaking
- life of contemplation
- none of the above

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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) 🤔



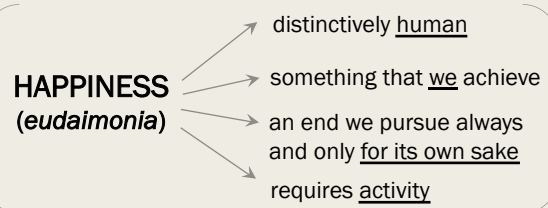
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The Pursuit of (Aristotelian) Happiness

- 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:



“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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