

A History of Philosophy | 14 Aristotle's Ethics ([link](#))

Transcript of Arthur Holmes' video lecture on Aristotle's *Nicomachean ethics* (youtu.be/cxHz6E0KqKq)

0:24 Arthur Holmes (AH): We started by pointing out that Aristotle's philosophy in every area is a teleological one, that is to say, there are certain natural ends which represent the proper functioning of whatever things we are talking about. Consequently, in order to develop an ethic, what Aristotle does, is to talk about the human soul and what are its proper functions. And that involves distinguishing between the nutritive function of what he calls the vegetative soul, the sensory functions, consciousness feeling of the animal soul, the rational function of the rational soul, which of course is the distinguishing thing that differentiates the human species among all other things, rational soul. So by virtue of his teleology it follows that the good is proper function. Or as he puts it, complete life in accordance with reason. And in a parallel statement, in accordance with virtue. Because virtue is simply proper functioning.

2:18 AH: I don't know if any of you have noticed this oddity I have. If people ask me how I am, I say "fine, I am functional" And they say "I suppose that's a start" or "is that all". To which I answer: "in Aristotelian terms, that's very good." Proper functioning, you tried.

2:43 AH: Well, the point is that virtue as Aristotle defines it is simply good functioning. Functioning right. Functioning in accordance with the inner telos, the final cause. You see, of what we are actually actualizing of our human potential, namely complete life in accordance with reason. So the notion of virtue is really pretty simple in that respect. The Greek term for virtue arete has a broader meaning, perhaps a looser meaning than our term virtue. Arete can simply mean excellence, quality, you see. So a virtuous person is one who has a human quality, a whole life lived in accordance with what is distinctively human. A human quality. Functioning how a human being should function. That's excellence.

4:14 AH: Keep in mind then that virtue has to do with the whole life both the outward behaviour and the inner disposition. Motivation. Intention. Attitude. In fact, in talking of virtue the usual way is to talk of virtues of moral dispositions. A disposition is what disposes you to certain kinds of behaviours, you see. So it's the inner functioning which disposes one to proper external functioning. In other words, a virtuous person is inner directed rather than simply responding to external stimuli. Inner directed out of the heart. [...]

5:34 AH: The question immediately arises then well if this is proper functioning, how do we acquire proper functions? How do we actualize this **capacity** for functioning [...]. We have the capacity, the potential. How are they going to be actualized. And here develops Aristotle's emphasis on habit, on habit formation. Because a settled disposition is what [...]s book called a habit of the heart. So how do you establish a habit of the heart? The obvious question. When Aristotle addresses he is talking about what we call moral development. A lot of work going on in moral development theory. And if it is talking of character development it is likely to be indebted to what Aristotle says about the development of virtues, because character is just a set of virtues unified in some way. Well, a set of virtues or vices. Good character, virtues.

7:05 AH: So the question of habit formation, how come that. If we are talking of a complete life lived in accordance with reason then presumably it has to be a habit, the formation of which is rationally guided. Or it is not going to be disposition in accordance with virtue. And so what he talks about basically is that there needs to be deliberation, choice, decision. That is to say that in one matter after the other, where a decision is called for, where there are two ways that you should go, more ways that you should go, what should I do? Deliberation about the ends, the telos, what constitutes good functioning, deliberation about ends, and about the means to those ends. And choice in accordance with that deliberation. Now, doing it once does not make a habit. The way he puts it is that – what's his phrase – one sparrow does not a summer make. Nor does one day. No, what you need is repeated

Aristotle's ethics

1. Soul
2. Virtue (arete)
 - disposition (weakness of will - akrasia)
 - habit formation (deliberation, choice)
3. Moral development
 - politics & art

decisions, repeated choices, based on deliberation again and again and again, until it becomes a mental habit. It is the repeated thought, thought for action that makes it habitual.

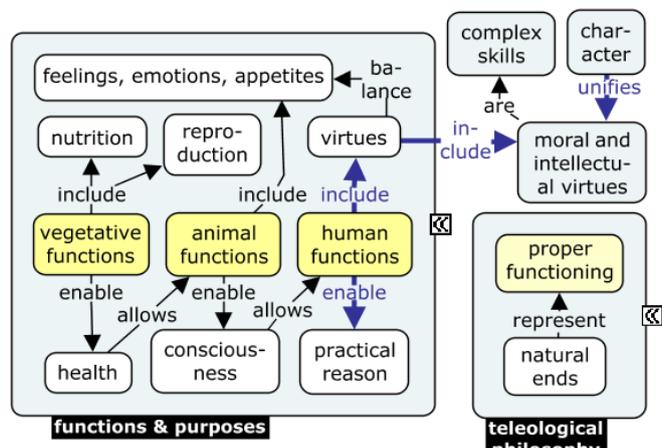
9:13 AH: Now you ask yourself about some of the habits that you have developed, when you drive an automobile. The driving of it has become an unconscious habit. But how does it get to this unconscious habit? By thinking as to what you should do for proper functioning with an automobile and deciding to do that. It's true with physical habits, it's true with mental habits. It's true with cultivating discipline of mind. Keep in mind the end, the means to the end, then decision to act accordingly. So, habit formation.

10:20 AH: At the same time he sees that there are some people who are going to have trouble with that, because that sort of habit formation takes self-discipline. Or, if you like, self-control, the virtue of temperance. How do you get temperance if you don't have it already and it takes temperance to get temperance. You see, it is a circular problem. But they suffer of what he calls akrasia, weakness of will. They don't have the stick-to-ittedness, the inner resolve, to be able to make the decision and stick by it. Weakness of will. So in the cases then of **people who are unable to rule themselves by reason**, like young children, others it has been said, by nature should be slaves, they have to be ruled by other people's reason. And in childhood training proper functional habits are instilled by discipline.

11:59 AH: That is his recognition of moral human failure. In Plato you remember the issue of the failure of doing courses, of how you control the appetite, the self-willed, the passions, that cannot be controlled. They have to be controlled by reason. And if the individuals are not sufficiently rational, they have to be controlled by others' reason, like the repetitive class of artisans, they have to be ruled by others. So Aristotle in that regard is very much in Plato's ballpark.

12:53 AH: But of course the question is how the deliberation goes. What sort of process is this deliberation so that it is able to guide. And the deliberation is such that we seek a mean between extremes. That is to say that if a virtue is a proper functioning of some aspect of the human soul, some aspect of personality, then a given personality characteristic, personality trait might be in excess, too much, out of balance, that way, or might be in deficiency, too little. So what you want is that quality of life that is neither in excess nor in deficiency but hits the mean, the rational mean, the balance. So the role of deliberation is to find the balance. Now, you can see how that goes if you take a look again at his view of the soul and you see how the thing works. If we talk about the vegetative soul, vegetative life. There the basic functions are nutrition and reproduction. And those good functionings have as their end physical health. On the other end there is the animal soul, and in this regard attention is particularly on the sensitive/sensory functions, that is to say particularly consciousness, feelings, emotions, appetites, the appetitive dimension. And the proper functioning here produces what he labels as the moral virtues. Moral virtues in which the appetites and the desires and emotions are in balance. Well, of course, you have as well the rational soul with its functions of thought and speech, doing art. And here what you want as proper functions is the intellectual virtues. And of the virtues of intellect he distinguishes two: one is practical reason, no I take it back, practical wisdom, and the other is contemplative wisdom.

16:49 AH: Now, about the sensitive life, feelings, appetites. Those feelings may be felt too much or too little: excess, deficiency. What we need is rather to feel, whatever we do or desire, at the right times with reference to **the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way** [when, what, who, why, how]. Now that's balance. And that's what you are looking for in deliberation. To feel, for instance, anger at the right time, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with right motive, and in the right way. To feel hungry, to feel hunger,



For the rest of the concept map, see csl4d.wordpress.com

to be driven by it, at the right times and so on and so forth. So it becomes a matter then of **monitoring and guiding, controlling, the emotional life** [management], moral virtues.

18:31 AH: And, as you have been reading Aristotle, you notice all the various virtues that he talks about. The virtue of courage, for instance, the excess of that kind of characteristics would be foolhardiness. Deficiency, cowardice. The virtue of generosity, a giving attitude towards people. The deficiency would be miserliness, stinginess, the excess profligacy, throwing it around unwisely. And so the mean between extremes is in terms of proper functioning, defined as keeping the emotional life in proper balance. Remember that way back to the Pre-Socratics, that notion of what is rational, what is just, what is the proper order of things, is always in terms of balance and proportion. So he develops it in that direction.

20:00 AH: You might say, well, what is the place of pleasure in the moral life and he addresses that in a couple of places in his Nicomachean ethics. He is explicit that pleasure is not the same as happiness. Happiness of course is proper functioning, well-being. Pleasure is more of an emotion, a feeling, which might be had in excess or deficiency at the right times and so on and so forth. The trouble with pleasures is that they are intermittent, they are contingent on external events, largely beyond our control, there are many different kinds of pleasures, that are of various moral worth, so pleasure cannot be the highest good if we evaluate them by some other standard. After all, there is pleasure in going out to the town, there is pleasure in reading Aristotle, two things of varying moral worth. Now in reality, his moral psychology is that pleasure is not an end to be pursued, it is more of a by-product, a side effect, of actualizing certain other [...]. You can be so intent on wondering what you are spending on that delicious meal out is worth out, but when it is all over you are not sure you enjoyed it. It is in the fulfilling activity as such that the pleasure is found, not as an end in itself, it is a fringe benefit.

22:21 AH: Well, the other two things then that we have to pick up on in this whole business of moral development has to do with the function of government, the place of the arts. Because Plato saw both of these as contributing to the improvement of the soul, so does Aristotle. In fact it is characteristic of political theory all the way through, until we get to people like Machiavelli, the Renaissance. The function of government has to do with the good, rather than with power. So Aristotle then looks at government in terms of the human telos, you see. And he defines the human being, not only as a rational being, but as a social being, a societal being. By nature we are social beings, he says, and that, what in translation is [...] by nature. In Greek it is just the word 'physai' (one word), by nature. And this of course is loaded with significance of all this teleology. Everything in nature has its final cause, its telos, its end. By virtue of its nature, its essence, its [...]. By nature, humans are social beings. Its our very essence to be social beings. We are not functioning aright except as societal beings. We don't function aright in isolation.

24:38 AH: Aristotle could never have written Robinson Crusoe. Daniel Defoe knew what he was doing, he was an 18th century social philosopher in the age of individualism. And you read the critical literature on Defoe, and it all comes tumbling out. What Defoe is picturing is a self-sufficient rational human being alone on his island with his goats and his god. The goats of course he domesticates, brings them under the rule of reason, like animals have to be. And when the cannibals come they have their cannibal feast, he certainly wouldn't want to have anything to do with them. In fact, he rescues man Friday and keeps a stern eye on him until he is sufficiently rationalized so that they can have a social contract. The Spanish sailors come, they are not sufficiently rational, he doesn't trust them. The English sailors come, social contract, and away they sail to a more social life. But Aristotle could never have written that. Because the conception of an isolated individual alone on his island, unbeknowned. We are social beings.

26:08 AH: With an interdependence. And the human good is only achieved in society. By virtue of the proper functioning of society, not just the individual. Well, in the light of that sort of thing then what he tries to do is to develop a conception of an ideal state. And you can anticipate that the ideal state is one that is properly functioning. Properly functioning in the light of the nature of the state and its proper end. In other words, what is a just society?

Intellectual virtues - practical wisdom - contemplative wisdom
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A just society is one that is rationally ordered for the common good. What is a just, good individual? One whose emotions are properly ordered for the common good, which means for his good. So the state in that sense is the individual read large. It has to be properly ordered for the common good.

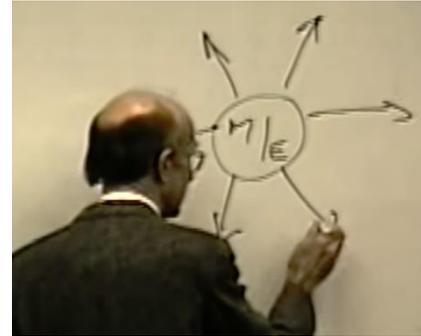
27:41 AH: And there the parallel to Plato begins to peter out. Because you recall that Plato repudiated the existing forms of government as unsuited, unjust, unstable. Aristocracy, democracy, tyranny, oligarchy, none of them work. He therefore set up one and only one political ideal under the rule of philosopher-kings. Now, that I suspect, is because Plato's ideal is an ideal that exists only in the transcendent heaven of Plato's forms. For Aristotle the forms only exist in the world of particulars. Particulars in imperfectly actualized forms. So there might be various competing actualizations of the ideal state. So Aristotle is open to alternative political constitutions. Alternative kinds of things. He is not interested in what would be the ideal structure of a just society. He is rather concerned about the proper functioning within any kind of society of family, of education, of the economic institutions, like in his days slavery and exchange, things of that sort, proper functioning in terms of the common good. And in as much as his conception of the good is for a complete life in accordance with reason. The kind of education he wants is what we would call a liberal education for a complete life in accordance with reason. You see, touching all areas of life. So Aristotle's political thinking then ... very clear-headed. It seems to me that a lot of our thinking in this country about politics is more platonic than it is Aristotelian. In the sense that we tend to think there is only one possible form of a good and just society, namely just one like the American. Rather than recognizing there might be varieties of viable alternatives.

30:45 AH: Well, what about the arts. Here again there is an initial and somewhat transitory similarity to Plato. When you see that he talks of art as a kind of imitation. But the similarity stops around there. For Plato, you see, art should imitate the form, the transcendent form. So art that imitates particulars, individuals, even individual like Socrates, are twice removed from reality, because the individual himself is just a copy of the form. But as far as Aristotle is concerned, art is not imitation of form, but imitation of life, or as it is often translated and to distinguish it from Plato, art is representational, yes, but representation of life, of characters, their emotions, fancy imitating their emotions, representing their emotions, that's the very thing Plato warned against in giving public readings and recitations. Imitating other people's emotions. Representation of characters, of emotions, their actions, because you can only see the universal within the kind of particular. So art helps you then to bring into focus that cumulative experience. So that you say of that character, well represented: yes, aren't we all like that (2x)? Because the genius of good art is that it helps you to see something universal in the particular. Now in that sense he finds poetry, which is a form of art, poetry more scientific than history. Now that strikes you as an oddity, because we don't think that way. But in his day he saw history as just narrating particulars chronically, not much more. Telling stories, whereas poetry in as far as it captures something universal is closer to what he calls science, which is theoretical thinking. Thinking in terms of universal principles. Now, what we would call art criticism, critique of art forms, art criticism and the criteria for art criticism, function with this sort of thing in mind. Having to do with the effect of the representation of emotions on the audience. So, while it comes to talking about drama for instance, he lays out appropriate formal characteristics for good drama, he is concerned about the emotional impact. A good tragedy must be such as to produce catharsis, particularly of the emotions of fear and pity, which can so easily get out of balance and rob us of our courage. Catharsis is a purging of the emotions. So that in a good tragedy pity is aroused, fear is aroused, and those emotions are then released in the outcome of the tragedy, and the emotional life is as it were cleansed and we're able to therefore freed from those emotions for a while and live a life more in accordance with reason. The ideal is certainly less contemplative in relationship to art than Plato with his

Arti = imitation of life.
(representation)

Catharsis (fear, pity) to
release courage.

contemplation of beauty itself. I hope you will see in then political theory and art the way in which his underlined metaphysic produces a result. Remember the diagram we played with with Plato? Get straight the metaphysics, the epistemology is of course a corollary of that (how you know depends on what you are talking about knowing) and from there political thought, aesthetics, ethics, educational theory and everything else tends to follow. And Aristotle is another of these classicists. Well, that's what I wanted to say about Aristotle. [37m23s]



This transcript was prepared by Sjon van 't Hof and can be accessed at the [CSL4D](#) website.