

Hobbes on Practical Reason

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Philosophy 4

1 Aristotle on Practical Reason

According to Aristotle, practical reason can be used well or poorly in two respects: it can determine the right *means* to one's ends, but it can also determine the right *ends*. Recall his comparison of the three lives: the life of gratification, honor, and of study. Aristotle thinks it is clear that each of these lives is better than the last, because the ends that define them are more choiceworthy. Practical reason needs not only recognize good means to a given end, but to recognize those ends that are worth pursuing.

We see this again in the fact that he distinguishes the virtues of character from the virtue of prudence. Virtues of character involve discerning the mean between two extremes, or vices, telling us how to act, given the ends that we have. Prudence involves discerning what ends are worth pursuing in order to have a happy life. So the two go hand in hand: one tells us how to obtain ends, the other what ends we ought to have.

2 Hobbes on Practical Reason

For Hobbes, practical reason is merely a matter of determining what good *means* are. Thus for Hobbes there is no aspect of rationality corresponding to prudence. Practical reason, for Hobbes, consists primarily in deliberation, the process that occurs when:

...in the mind of man appetites and aversions, hopes and fears, concerning one and the same thing arise alternately, and diverse good and evil consequences of the doing or omitting the thing propounded come successively into our thoughts, so that sometimes we have an appetite for it, sometimes an aversion from it, ... the whole sum of desires, aversions, hopes and fears, continued till the thing be either done or thought impossible....

Thus deliberation is always about whether or not we desire an end, especially in terms of what that end is another *means to*.

A question for you to think about: how does this difference as regards practical reason lead to Aristotle and Hobbes's very different opinions regarding a supposed 'highest good'? Consider this as you read what Hobbes has to say about 'Felicity'.