

Aristotle on Practical Reason and the Good

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Philosophy 100A

1 Practical Reason

Practical reason is our capacity to make decisions and act in a way that can be normatively evaluated. We can do things that make sense given our aims and purposes.

If my goal is to get in shape and lose weight, it is *rational* for me to eat right and exercise. It is *irrational* to sit on the couch eating donuts all day.

On the other hand, if my goal is to get in shape and lose weight, my exercising has this goal as its purpose.

In using practical reason, we are identifying *means* to *ends*. Though, note that some activities are their own ends.

2 Ends and Value

Teleology is the study of purpose. Aristotle has a teleological theory of value, which is to say that value (good, bad, right, wrong) *comes from* purposes, and in particular, the purposes of actions. (see 1094a2)

When an activity is not part of its own end, then it is only worthwhile, only good, relative to the end which it serves. Surgery, for instance, is only good when it is necessary for health and survival!

We can arrange activities in a hierarchy of purpose and the inheritance of value. Surgery inherits its value from health, which inherits its value in the continued survival of an organism. (see 1094a10)

Where does the hierarchy terminate? Where does all of this value ultimately come from? (see 1094a20)

3 The Teleology of Practical Reasoning as Such

Practical reasoning, itself, has a purpose as well. Consider that we engage in practical reasoning in order to do an activity well, in order to achieve what is good relative to that activity. It seems then that goodness is the end of practical reasoning. (see 1094b5)

This is the first step in Aristotle's general argument in NE Book I that to act rightly is to act in accordance with the virtues.