

## PHIL 321

### Lecture 16: Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books II & III

10/22/2013

#### **Virtue, continence (*enkrateia*), incontinence (*akrasia*), vice**

These four kinds of character are distinguished by three conditions they involve: (a) rational concerns/ends (b) non-rational attitudes (c) actions that result from (a) & (b)

Rational aim	Non-rational attitude	Resulting action	Agent's disposition
Good	Good	Good	Virtue
Good	Bad	Good	Continence (Self-control)
Good	Bad	Bad	Incontinence (akratic)
Bad	"Bad"	Bad	Vice

#### **Virtue as a mean state**

In Ch. 5, Aristotle sets out to identify what kind of psychic condition virtue is

- Argues that it is a state (*hexis*, also often translated as "disposition"): a settled condition in which we have a tendency to feel and do certain things in certain situations

Then, in Ch. 6, he tries to identify what kind of state it is

- Here Aristotle is employing his central conception of definition as through genus and species (*per genus et differentiam*)

**[Recall function argument; there it was just left general that virtue "makes the function" performed well; here that's picked up and he asks, well, "In what kind of condition can a human being flourish"?]**

Virtue is concerned with feelings and actions, and feelings and actions can admit of a more and a less, and so can be in excess, deficiency, and intermediacy

Since excess and deficiency are detrimental, and virtue is beneficial, virtue aims at what is intermediate

- A distinguishes between intermediate "in the object" and "relative to us"
- **[Go back now to the question what makes it the case that a given act X in circumstances C is virtuous; it is facts about where that action lies on the continuum of possible actions available to the agent; it is the one that best approximates the mean; it can't make essential reference to the virtuous agent, because virtue is being defined as a disposition to perform those very actions]**

Virtues, then, are trained dispositions to exhibit emotions and actions over distinct ranges of behavior or objects of desire or aversion

The following diagram represents A's overall scheme:

Range of object	Kind of emotion	Excess	Mean	Deficiency
Danger	Fear/Confidence	Rash	Courageous	Coward
Physical goods (e.g. food, drink, sex)	Lust etc.	Intemperate	Temperate	Insensible
Wealth	"Heart"	Wasteful	Generous	Ungenerous
Status	Spirit	Vain	Magnanimous	Pusillanimous
Respect	Temper (anger)	Irascible	Mild	Cold
Social intercourse	Sensibility	Buffoon	Witty	Boor

## "Pre-conditions" for virtue: Book III

### Voluntariness/Responsibility (III 1)

[1] First criterion: praise and blame are attached to voluntary (*hekon*) actions

[2] Involuntary actions are caused by (a) force or (b) ignorance

(a) Force = caused by an *external principle* (e.g. wind blows you over)

≠ caused by *compulsion* (e.g. throwing cargo overboard in storm, the origin of the motion still lies within the agent)

**[In the abstract, such things seem not-choiceworthy, and so the idea is that no one would voluntarily do them unless they were in particular circumstances that made it more choice worthy than other options]**

**[Ask here first question about relationship between voluntariness and responsibility? Often, as it gets cashed out nowadays since a famous paper by P.F. Strawson, a person is morally responsible for X iff she/he is praiseworthy or blameworthy for X. Does that work here, or should we think that Aristotle is discussing a different topic? Aristotle notes that people are actually praised for such actions, so they must be voluntary at least in some sense. Often in discussions nowadays people focus on the negative side, saying that we should let people off the hook and not blame them when they suffer coercion. But, Aristotle raises the question, would that mean we also have to \*not\* praise people for such actions either?]**

**[Correspondingly, Aristotle doesn't want to say that pleasure and pains force us to do something because they are external. And the question is, what would be the fundamental difference between saying that you do X because person Y forced you (e.g. was threatening your kids) and saying that you did X because the pleasure forced you?]**

(b) Ignorance of the particulars:

- i) who is doing it ([A says this is impossible to be ignorant of, except in cases of madness, is it?])
- ii) what he is doing ([Aeschylus said he did not know he was forbidden from revealing secrets])
- iii) about what or to what he is doing it ([think that his son is an enemy])
- iv) what he is doing it with ([that the barbed spear has a button on it])

- v) for what result ([**giving someone a drink to save his life we might kill him**])
- vi) in what way ([**wanting to touch someone in sparing, we might wound him**])

[3] Voluntary actions are those for which the principle is in the agent, and the particulars of which are known by the agent

[4] A draws two conclusions from this discussion:

[4a] Actions caused by appetite and spirit are voluntary

[4b] Some actions performed by animals and children are voluntary (since caused by appetite and spirit)

**[Revisit issue of responsibility]**

Decision (III 2-4)

**[A just says, without comment, that decisions better distinguishes character than actions do? What could be his reasons for this?]**

**[A runs through a bunch of things that decision could not be: e.g. it's not wish because we can wish for things that we can't decide to do (e.g. the impossible, other people's results); belief, no; concludes that it must be what is previously deliberated about; so natural turns to discuss deliberation]**

[1] Deliberation involves: (a) rational thought about means-ends and (b) a grasp of the universal

[2] Deliberation concerns: (c) what is possible and (d) what is up to us

[3] Decision is deliberative desire to perform an action that is up to us

[4] All actions caused by decision are voluntary (but not vice-versa, e.g. actions solely by appetite and spirit)

[5] Virtuous actions are caused by decision (but it is not always necessary to deliberate explicitly before each decision leading to a specific action)

Responsibility for character (III 5)

Is vice involuntary? It might seem to be if people are not responsible for what appears good to them, they might not be responsible for ignorance of what should be aimed at.

Since A thinks that knowledge of the end is necessary for voluntary action, blameless ignorance of the end might mean that people do not act viciously voluntarily. (This would be disastrous for A's overall picture)

A tries to respond that while no one can change their character or what appears good to him/her through one decision, characters and conceptions of good are caused by repeated voluntary actions