

PHIL 321
Lecture 14: Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I

10/15/2013

The highest good (chs. 1 & 2)

[1] Every craft (*technê*), investigation (*methodos*), action (*praxis*), and decision (*prohairesis*) aims at some good (in what follows we will focus on actions)

[2] Thus, the good (*to agathon*) is that at which everything aims

- Is this an invalid step?

[3] Ends (“*telos*,” i.e. the goods aimed for in purposeful action) differ in being

- [2a] actions or activities themselves, or
- [2b] products that result from the actions or activities aim at (producing) them

[4] Ends may be *hierarchically structured*: one end (e.g. bridles) can be pursued for the sake of another (e.g. horse-riding)

- In such a case, the superordinate end is more *choiceworthy* than the subordinate end
- The superordinate end also sets the conditions for when the subordinate end is accomplished well (e.g. the value of a bridle *qua* bridle is determined by the “needs” of horse-riding)

[5] If there is some end we pursue *only* for itself and for which we pursue all our other ends, this end will be the *highest* good (or, simply, *the* good)

[6] There must be some limit to the ends we choose for the sake of something else, otherwise our desires would be “empty and futile” (1094a21-2)

- [P1] If there were no highest good, then our desires would be empty
- [P2] But, our desires are not empty
- [C] There is a highest good

[7] If we knew what this highest good was, we could order our lives correctly

[8] Aristotle maintains that when we are discussing the HG we can't expect the same level of precision as when we are doing, say, mathematics (ch. 3 1094b13-27)

[9] A claims that everyone agrees that “happiness” (*eudaimonia*) is the *name* of the HG, but disagree about what happiness is (some say pleasure, others wealth, others honor, others thinking) (ch. 4 1095a18-25)

[10] People generally develop their conception of the HG from the lives they live, and there are three main kinds of lives: gratification, political activity, study (ch. 5 1095b14-16)

Formal criteria for the highest good (ch. 7)

- [A] **Choiceworthy:** The HG must be good or valuable in some way
- [B] **End:** The HG must be an end
- [C] **Complete:** X is *more complete* than Y if (a) X is pursued for X and (b) Y is pursued for something else, Z
X is complete without qualification if X is pursued *only* for itself (1097a)
- [D] **Self-sufficient:** All by itself makes a life choiceworthy and lacking nothing (1097b)
NB: This does *not* necessarily mean that the value of a life that has the HG can't be increased;
It could mean that a life with the HG doesn't need anything more to make it choiceworthy as a life

Happiness seems to meet these criteria (but, again, we don't know what, exactly, happiness is)

“Ergon” argument (“*ergon*” often rendered as “function,” “characteristic activity,” or “work”)

- [P1] The good for something that has a function and (characteristic) action depends on its work
 - [P2] The parts of a human have a function; so a human as a whole should have a special function
 - [P3] The “lives” of nutrition and perception are not unique to humans
 - [P4] A life expressing reason (of two kinds) is remaining possibility for human special function
 - [P5] “Life” understood as activity (as opposed to capacity) is more properly life
 - [C1] The human function is the soul's activity expressing reason
 - [P7] The function of an X is the same in kind as the function of a good F; the latter accomplishes its function *well*
 - [C2] Given C1 and P7, the good for humans is accomplishing C1 well
 - [P8] A function is completed well when its completion expresses its proper virtue
 - [C3] Given C1, C2, and P8, the human good is the soul's activity which expresses virtue
- Happiness is a life [i.e. the soul's activity] based on [i.e. expressing] virtue (in chs. 8-9, A canvasses how this candidate gels with other ideas about happiness)

Additional constraints on happiness (chs. 8 & 9)

- [E] It requires activity based on virtue in a *complete* life (ch. 9 1100a)
- [F] It requires external goods (ch. 8 1099b)
- [G] It must be the best, finest, and most pleasant (life) (ch. 8 1099a)

Problems

- [1] Has A shows us that there is one highest good (is the argument in section 1.4 sound)?
- [2] Why believe that the work of a human being is what is *special* or *unique* to human beings?
- [3] Why should we think that accomplishing the human work well is productive of, or identical with, happiness (e.g. does it meet constraint G)?