**Aristotle's Ethics: A Review**

**I. Aim and Structure of the *Nicomachean Ethics***

**A.** Aristotle's aim in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*EN*) is broadly analogous to Plato's

project in the *Republic*: to develop an account of the best form of life for a human

being (cf. *Rep*. 344e1) and to show that this form of life requires the conventional

virtues (cf. rest of *Rep*.).

**B.** *EN* begins with a consideration of the ultimate human good. In Book I Aristotle

offers an argument to show that there is such a thing, *eudaimonia.* He then offers a

famous argument, the *function argument*, intended to show in outline what it

consists in. The remainder of the treatise fills in this outline:

• Books II-V of the ethics discuss the virtues of character Aristotle regards as

essential to *eudaimonia*.

• Books VI-X explore further topics of relevance to *eudaimonia*, including the so- called virtues of thought, friendship, pleasure, and education.

**II. Further Methodological Points from Book I.**

**A.** Ethics as Aristotle conceives it is part of political science (I.2).

**B.** One should not seek too much exactness in ethics (I.3).

**C.** Ethical argument should appeal to common beliefs (*endoxa*) (I.4).

**D.** Forming correct ethical beliefs depends on correct habituation (I.4).

**E.** *Contra* Socrates and Plato, 'good' does not denote a single property (I.6).

**III. Aristotle's Eudaimonism: *EN*****I. 1-6**

**A.** *EN* I.1 begins with a difficult and surprising pair of claims, sometimes construed

(uncharitably) as an argument.

• (1) Every craft, inquiry, action and decision seeks some good.

• (2) *The* good is what everything seeks (doesn't follow).

• A charitable reading: (2) isn't an inference from (1). Aristotle doesn't *argue* for a final human good until *EN* I.7.

**B.** *EN* I.1 reflects Aristotle's commitment to *eudaimonism*.

• (1) *eudaimonism*: an agent has reason to pursue a course of

action only insofar as it best furthers her own *eudaimonia* (normative claim).

•(1) is a claim about the character of practical reason, the faculty that exercises

"foresight on behalf of the whole soul" (*Rep.* 441e)..

• Aristotle has not yet said what *eudaimonia* consists in.

• *Eudaimonia* is an objective notion. Its general content is not fixed by beliefs

or motivational attitudes

**IV. *EN* I.7 asserts four independent and controversial claims:**

**A.** There is a final human good.

**B.** Human beings have functions (*erga*).

**C.** The human *ergon* is an activity of the soul involving reason.

**D.** The final good depends on the perfection of this activity.

**V.** **The argument for** **(A):**

**(1)** *x* is the final good iff it is *complete, self-sufficient*, and *most-choiceworthy*.

**(2)** *eudaimonia* satisfies these three formal criteria.

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**(3):** Therefore, *eudaimonia* is the highest good.

• A good is *complete* if it is chosen *only* for its own sake (1097a31).

• A good is *self-sufficient* if, in having it, one lacks nothing worth having (1097b10).

• A good is *most-choiceworthy* if it is not merely one good among many (1097b17).

**VI.** **The argument for (C):**

1. For any F, where F is a kind with a function, the good of an F=performing the function of Fs well.
2. The function (*ergon*) of any living being *x* is determined by *x*'s unique and

characteristic activity (1097b23)

**(2)** The unique and characteristic activity of human beings is reasoning (1098a3).

**(3)** So the HG=performing activity of the rational part of the soul well.

**(4)** An F performs its function well when F acts in accordance with virtue (1098a7-12).

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**(5):** Therefore, the HG=activity of the soul expressing reason in a virtuous manner.

•Note the specific sense of “virtue” in **(4).** Aristotle isn’t thinking of virtue in a narrow, moral sense; rather, he’s identifying virtue with “excellence”, and in particular, he’s understanding a virtue as that which makes one perform one’s function WELL (1106a15-17). So, given that the human function is reasoning, and given that a thing’s virtue is that which makes a thing perform its function well, *human virtues are those states of the soul whereby a person reasons well.*

**VII. Virtues of Character and Virtues of Thought (i.13)**

* 1. The function argument in i.7, though it gives us an account of what a human virtue must be—namely, something whereby one reason well— it doesn’t tell us what the specific virtues are. For example, we don’t know yet if the virtues are the commonly recognized virtues—courage, temperance, justice, etc.

* 1. Aristotle begins the task of identifying the specific virtues by first arguing that virtues come *in two kinds*. He thinks the virtues must come in two kinds b/c he thinks that *rationality comes in two different kinds*.
     1. “The remaining possibility, then, is some sort of life of action of the [part of the soul] that has reason. Now [this part has two parts, which have reason in different ways], one as obeying the reason [in the other part], the other as having reason and thinking.” (i.7 1098a3)
  2. Rationality element in the human soul is 2-fold, consisting 1st in the intellect (“thinking part”), which is rational *per se*, and secondarily in the appetites, which are not rational *per se*, but which are derivatively rational in that, unlike the desires of non-rational animals, they are potentially *responsive to* or *obedient to* reason.
  3. “The division between virtues also reflects this difference. For some virtues are called virtues of thought, others virtue of character; wisdom, comprehension, and intelligence are called virtues of thought, generosity and temperance virtues of character.” (i.13, 1103a5-7)
  4. The Virtues of Character are the Virtues of the Reason-Responsive Part (the part concerned with desires and emotions).
     1. Examples: Temperance, courage, justice.
     2. Our non-rational desires and emotions can be trained so as to *follow reason*; they can agree with practical reason’s rational plans and aims. When one’s non-rational desires are in this condition of obedience, one has a virtue of character.
     3. So having virtue of character is a matter of having well-ordered and obedient desires and emotions, that is, desires and emotions that are obedient to reason.
  5. Virtues of Intellect: Virtues of the Strictly Rational Part
     1. intelligence (“practical reasoning”)
     2. understanding/wisdom (“theoretical reasoning”)

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1. **Virtue of Character: Specifics** 
   1. Virtues of Character Result from Habituation
      1. Similar to craft production
         1. “Virtues, by contrast, we acquire, just as we acquire craft, by having previously activated them. For we learn a craft by producing the same product that we produce when we have learned it, becoming builders, for instance, by building, and harpists by playing the harp; so also, then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions.” (ii.1 1103a32-1103b2).
      2. Importance of Habits
         1. “Virtue of character results from habit; hence its name “ethical”, slightly varied from “ethos” (ii.1 1103a17).
         2. “A state of character arises from the repetition of similar activities. Hence we must display the right activities, since differences in these imply corresponding differences in the states. It is not unimportant, then, to acquire one sort of habit or another, right from our youth; rather it is very important, indeed all-important.” (ii.1 1103b21-25)
      3. How ought we to understand Aristotle’s emphasis on habit, repetition, craft?
         1. We do not learn simply to repeat the actions until they become automatic or “second nature”. We must also acquire the virtuous person’s state and motive, 1105a32. Hence habituation must include more than simply becoming accustomed to type of action.
            1. “First, he must know that he is doing virtuous actions; second, he must decide on them, and decide on them for themselves; and third, he must also do them from a firm and unchanging state.” (ii.4 1105a32)
      4. Development of Likes and Dislikes is Crucial (ii.3 1104b3-24).
         1. Why is pleasure so important? Pleasure and pain lead us astray. Pleasure is our earliest motive. It is difficult to resist pleasure.
   2. Virtue is a state (*hexis*) (genus) (ii.5)
      1. A state is an entrenched condition of character.
   3. Virtue is a MEAN (species)
      1. Doctrine of the Mean (DOM): the doctrine that virtue involves having our feelings inbetween excess and deficiency.
         1. “We can be afraid, for instance, or be confident, or have appetites, or get angry, or feel pity, in general have pleasure or pain, both too much and too little, and in both ways not well; but having these feelings at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the intermediate condition” (ii.6 1106b18-25)
         2. The mean is relative: Milo
         3. The DOM is *not* the doctrine of moderation: it’s not the case that we’re seeking to have the level of anger that is inbetween barely perceptible irritation and raging anger. On the contrary, sometimes it will be appropriate to have raging anger (in cases of social injustice, for instance); other times it will be appropriate to have barely perceptible irritation (for example, losing a game of Monopoly).
         4. The DOM not simply saying that we ought to aim for what is “appropriate” or “proportionate” or “right”. If it said this, it would be uninformative!
         5. We should understand the mean in the following way: “Mean” means “what is between total suppression and total indulgence of non-rational feelings.” One extreme is leaving our non-rational impulses completely uncontrolled; the other extreme is trying to repress or eliminate them altogether.
            1. Temperate person isn’t supposed to eliminate desires for food, drink, or sex, or stop enjoying them; she’s supposed to regulate and shape her enjoyment so that she has them on the right occasions. Similarly, brave person isn’t supposed to eliminate fears altogether he’s Suppose to organize them so that they cohere with his rational plans.
   4. Involves “decisions.” (iii 2) A is speaking technically here. Virtue eventuates in intentional action, not simply action on impulse.
   5. Defined by prudent person’s reason: the mean that the virtuous person aims for is that feeling or action that the prudent person would recognize is correct.
   6. Big ‘ole summary: “Virtue, then, is a state that DECIDES, consisting in a MEAN, the mean RELATIVE to us, which is defined by reference to reason, that is to say, to the reason by reference to which the PRUDENT person would define it. It is a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency” (ii.6 1107a1-5).
2. **Virtue of Character as an Expression of Reason (An example)**
   1. Take atemperate action. In the middle of my diet, I find myself confronted with a jelly donut, and I really want it. This appetite for the jelly donut is leading me towards it. How does the virtuous person act?
   2. Aristotle thinks that 2 different events go into my acting virtuously in this situation.
      1. First, my REASON is going to DELIBERATE about what is best for me to do, and it will issue in a DECISION. Intelligence is the virtue governing this kind of reasoning, so when my reason deliberates about what I ought to do, I actualize the virtue of INTELLIGENCE. This if the first way in which my virtuous action expresses rationality.
      2. Second, my appetite for the donut will respond with OBEDIENCE to this decision. The act of obedience is a (derivative) way of being rational. This is the second way in which I express rationality when I act virtuously.
   3. So, in sum, each virtue of character expresses “the life of action of the rational part,” because each virtue involves exercising rationality in the two ways outlined above.
   4. This is important, b/c it shows that we can fulfill our function without taking up study; we can engage in excellent reasoning without picking up a philosophy book.
   5. But note that this raises a question: ought we to fulfill our function (and hence be happy) by devoting our lives to practicing the virtues of character, or by devoting our lives to practicing philosophy? (See the “comprehensive vs. intellectualist debate” below).
3. **The Specific Virtues of Character (**II.7)

*Excessive Mean Deficient*

Fear Cowardice Courage [Nameless]

Boldness Rashness Courage Cowardice

Physical pleasures Intemperance Moderation [Nameless]

Money: giving Wastefulness Generosity Ungenerosity

1. **Virtues and Eudaimonism**

Aristotle is a Eudaimonist.

* + 1. Eudaimonism: one has reason to do something if and only if that thing promotes one’s happiness.

Because Aristotle is a Eudaimonist, he can defend his account of virtues (show that we ought to be virtuous) only if he can show that his list of virtues (temperance, courage, justice, etc. contribute to our happiness.

a. Can he show that temperance (rather than intemperance) contributes to our happiness?

* + 1. He thinks so. He apparently thinks that being temperate helps us achieve our *long-term interests.* One’s long-term rational plans would be undermined if you couldn’t control your appetites.
    2. Similarly for courage. If we weren’t courageous, if we didn’t have control over our fears, we couldn’t accomplish the long-term projects that we care about.
  1. But what about JUSTICE? How does being just (i.e. respecting other people’s things and property, etc.) lead to happiness?
     1. Recall book II of the *Republic*. Thrasymachus thinks that justice goes against our rational self-interest. If you can get away with acting unjustly, you should. That is, what it is rational to do (i.e. what will make us happy) is to SEEM just, not to BE JUST.
     2. Can Aristotle respond to Thrasymachus? We need to look at Aristotle’s account of FRIENDSHIP to see how it can help motivate the idea that we don’t act against our own good when we act justly.

1. **Overview of Friendship**
   1. Three Kinds of Friendships (8.3 1156a8)
      1. Utility
      2. Pleasure
      3. Virtue
   2. Conditions of (Complete?) Friendship:
      1. “[If they are to be friends], then, they must have goodwill to each other, wish goods and be aware of it, from one of the causes mentioned above” (8.2 1156a4-5)
   3. Complete Friendship
      1. Friendship between two people “similar in virtue” (1156b8)
      2. These two people wish goods to each other “insofar as they are good,” and because they are “good in their own right” they “wish goods to each other for each other’s own sake” (and not “coincidentally”). This concern has two aspects:
         1. Other-directed concern: A wishes goods to B for B’s own sake, not simply for A’s sake.
         2. Essential (Non-Coincidental) concern: A wishes goods to B because of who B *essentially* (non-coincidentally) is.
            1. Who is B essentially? Answer: a rational agent.
            2. Who is B coincidentally? Answer: someone useful or pleasant.

Examples of contrast: 1156a10-20, 1156b7-12, 1157a15-17.

Person is essentially understanding: 1166a22, 1168b30-2

* + 1. Complete friends share similar psychological states, such as aims and goals (1170b16 17) and
    2. They live together, sharing thought and discussion (1157b8-19, 1159b25-33, 1166a1-12, 1171b30-1172a6).
    3. The true friend aims at what is good (1162a5, b12, 1165b14-16) and fine (1168b28-1169a12).  Because virtue is fine, the friend is concerned with his friend's virtue.
    4. Enduring
    5. It is *this* complete form of friendship that Aristotle wants to show is compatible with eudaimonism.

1. **Account of friendship applied to oneself: Self Love**
   1. (True) Self-Love (9.4, 9.8)
      * 1. Aristotle identifies a person with the controlling part of that person’s soul: viz., reason.  This is why Aristotle thinks that proper love involves a concern for one's own reason.
        2. In true self love, I wish goods to my rational part.
   2. Bad Self-Love (9.4, 9.8) (1166b3-27)
      * 1. Bad self-love is self-love that is directed to the non-rational part of soul (1168b19-21). This sort of self-love (unlike true self-love) necessarily conflicts with the interests of others. For the more intemperate a person is, the more likely that person is to have desires that conflict with other people’s desires, and the less likely that person is to co-operate with others (1167b9-16).

Aristotle will appeal to proper self-love in order to show how virtue friendship (complete friendship) is compatible with eudaimonism (1166a1-2, 10, 1166a30-32, 1168b1-1169a12). Basically, he’s going to argue that complete friendship is a type of self-love.

1. **From Self-love to Friendship: The Friend as Other Self**
   1. To treat someone as another self, we must treat that person like we treat ourselves. This means that we treat that person’s interest as significant and worthy of our concern in its own right.
      1. Example: parent and child. (8.12 1161b28).
   2. Treating my friend as another self is not to do whatever that person asks me to do, since she might be mistaken about her true interest. Rather to treat my friend as another self is to wish goods to her rational part.
   3. What, psychologically speaking, is necessary for me to come to see someone else as “another self”—that is, to regard the well-being of another as worthy of concern in its own right?
      1. Similarity is crucial. Think of the child case. The parent is concerned with the child's welfare for the child's own sake, and according to Aristotle the parent can do this because she regards the child as "another self" (1161b19, 28). What causes the parent to see the child as another self? Answer: the fact that the child shares the parent’s psychological and physical characteristics. Something similar applies to siblings: because siblings live together and interact regularly, they inevitably share much in common and so can regard each other as other selves (1161b30-35).
   4. It is because friends share similar psychological states, aims, and goals (1170b16-17) that they can come to regard each other as other selves.

The upshot: Aristotle uses *intra*personal love (self-love) as a model for interpersonal love. He says that if you love yourself, you will also love your friends, since they are other versions of you. It follows from this that we don’t make sacrifices when we do things for our friends’ sakes. Why not? Because these people are other selves, and so benefitting them is a way of benefitting ourselves.

1. **Book X: Does Happiness = Study?** 
   1. A Return to Happiness
      1. Most Complete
         1. X is most complete if x is choiceworthy always for its own sake, never for the sake of anything else. (1097a30-5)
         2. Self Sufficient
            1. X is self sufficient when all by itself it makes a life choiceworthy and lacking nothing (1097b15-6)
   2. The life of Contemplation/Study Satisfies these Criteria Better than the Life of Moral Virtues
      1. Self Sufficiency
         1. “”…the just person needs other people as partners and recipients of his just actions; and the same is true of the temperate person and the brave person and each of the others” (X.7 1177a30-3); “For the generous person will need money for generous actions, and the just person will need it for paying debts, since wishes are not cear, and people who are not just pretend to wish to do justice….” (1178a303).
         2. “But the wise person is able, and more able the wiser he is, to study even by himself; and though he presumably does it better with colleagues, even so he is more self-sufficient than any other [virtuous person]” (X.7 1177b1).
      2. Completeness
         1. “Happiness seems to be found in leisure, since we accept trouble so that we can be at leisure, and fight wars so that we can be at piece….Now the virtues concerned with action have their activities in politics or war, and actions here seem to require trouble. This seems completely true for actions in war, since no one chooses to fight a war, and no one continues it, for the sake of fightin a war; for someone would have to be a complete murderer if he made his friends his enemies so that there could be battles and killings….Hence among actions expressing the virtues those in politis and war are preeminently fine and great; but they require trouble, aim at some further end, and are choiceworthy for something other than themselves” (X.7 1177b16-20).
         2. “Besides, study seems to be liked because of itself alone, since it has no result beyond having studied. But from the virtues concerned with action we try to a greater or lesser extent to gain something beyond the action itself.” (X.7 1177b1-5).“But the activity of understanding, it seems, is superior in excellene because it is the activity of study, aims at no end beyond itself and has its own proper pleasure, which increases itself” (1177b20-3)
   3. The Activity of Study Expresses the Best Part of Us; Gods study, but do not engage in morally virtuous activity.
      1. Activity of Study Activates our Understanding, which is the part of ourselves that we share with the God.
         1. “[Such a life of study] would be superior to the human level. For someone will live it not insofar as he is a human being, but insofar as he has some divine element in him. And the activity of this divine element is as much superior to the activity expressing the rest of virtue as this element is superior to the compound. Hence if understanding is something divine in comparison with a human being, so also will the life that expresses understanding be divine in comparison with human life” (1177b27-33).
         2. “For we traditionally suppose that the gods more than anyone are blessed and happy; but what sorts of actions ought we to ascribe to them? Just actions: Surely they will appear ridiculous making contracts, returning deposits and so on. Brave actions? Generous actions? Whom will they gie to? And surely it would be absurd for them to have currency or anything like that. What would their temperate actions be? Surely it is vulgar praise to say that they do not have base appetite. When we go through them all, anything that concerns actions appears trivial and unworthy of the gods.
   4. A Departure from the Function Argument?
      1. In appealing to the divinity of contemplation, Aristotle seems to argue as follows
         1. Happiness should be identified with the most divine element of the human soul.
         2. Contemplation is the most godlike, because it is the activity characteristic of gods.
         3. Hence, happiness = contemplation.
   5. How is this argument (1-3) compatible with the function argument? We are rational animals, not gods. Unlike gods, we are essentially embodied, and so are essentially subject to non-rational desires. Aristotle seems to recognize this fact when he recommends the doctrine of the mean. He says that our proper state is not complete suppression of the bodily.
2. **What is at Stake for the Value of Morally Virtuous Activity**
   1. If X *identifies* study with happiness, it is saying that happiness consists of study alone. This would seem to imply that the virtues of character are to be valued simply as a means to study.
      1. Problem: if this is right, then how do we make sense of Aristotle’s repeated claim in the *NE* that virtues and virtuous actions are to be chosen for their own sakes?
      2. Another problem: it seems unlikely that the virtues of character are the best means to contemplation.
3. **Some Responses**
   1. Aristotle changed his mind
   2. Aristotle offers to incompatible accounts and doesn’t realize it.
   3. Book X isn’t really a part of the *NE*, or at the very least wasn’t written when the rest of the *NE* was written.
4. **Reconciliation?**
   1. We can try to reconcile Book I with Book X if we take book X to be making weaker statements. One Possibility:
      1. Contemplation is the *most important* component of happiness (though not the only part).
      2. Note that (i) is different from the claim that happiness consists in contemplation alone.
5. **Terminology**

Exclusive (Intellectualist) Conception of Happiness: Happiness consists exclusively in contemplation

Inclusive (Comprehensive) Conception of Happiness: Happiness includes both virtue of character and wisdom.