Chapter 18

Happiness: The Function Argument

18.1 Readings and Homework

- Readings: Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* book I

- Further Readings and sources for the course:

  - R. Kraut, "Aristotle's Ethics" SEP 2005
  - D.S. Hutchinson "Ethics", Cambridge Companion to Aristotle

- Study questions:

  1. Among the goals of our actions, which is the more important according to Aristotle?
  2. Who can learn about ethical values and actions?
  3. What are the relationships between happiness and virtue?
  4. What is the highest good for humans according to Aristotle?
  5. What is the proper method in ethical or political science according to Aristotle?

18.2 Introduction

Two main works on ethics by Aristotle:

- *Eudemiam Ethics* – Eudemus was a friend

- *Nichomachean Ethics* – Nichomachus was his son

Both deal with the same issues. It is generally accepted that the latter (NE) is a revised and improved version of the former (EE). The main issues are:

1. human good and happiness
2. virtue (*arete*)
3. how to live the best human life
4. what to praise and what to blame
5. pleasure and friendship

It should be noted that Aristotle was the first to offer a separated, systematic treatment of ethical matters. Ethical theory is for the first time considered as an independent discipline, in particular independent from political theory.

18.3 Ethics: How to lead the best life?

- **The problem of Ethics is the problem of the hierarchy of goods:**

  As usual, Aristotle starts with basic assumptions, taken from experience and common sense.

  Under the assumption that all activities aim at some good, there is an indefinite multiplicity of goods (from satisfying hunger to pass a high degree in mathematics). From experience, we can easily come up with a (presumably non exhaustive) list of goods.

  However, it is much more difficult to come up with a hierarchy of these goods. In particular: which is the highest?

- Aristotle argues that whatever the highest good is, it should meet **three requirements:**

  1. **It is not chosen for the sake of another good**: if a product is a further end of an action, then the good provided by the product is higher than the good provided by the action (1094a5)

2. **All other goods are chosen for its sake:** "the ruling science is more choiceworthy than all the ends subordinate to it" (1094a15)

3. **It is chosen for its own sake:** infinite regress argument (1094a20).

- Discussion question:

  Contrast this with Plato for whom justice, for example, is the true virtue which necessarily leads to happiness, because it is a good by itself AND for its consequences.

- **Why study Ethics (political science)?**

  We study ethics as **adults**. We begin to study ethics armed with a bunch of feelings, habits, preferences and opinions, acquired by experience from childhood up to now. As adults, we would like a sound plan to live well and to be happy. To this aim, **we look for a systematized and rational view on ethical matters.**

  Thus, Ethics is just about the problem stated above: what is the highest end of our action? Ethics, or political science has exactly the characteristics, as a science, that the highest good has, as a subject of a science (searched for itself, searched by all others, and not searched for anything else)

  Notice that Ethics, for Aristotle as for Plato, is concerned with the issue of **the best way to lead your life**. It has an immediate practical impact. At the end of the day, Ethics aims at answering the question: how should I act to be happy?

- **How to study Ethics?** Two Points:

  1. **A restricted degree of clarity and exactness, fitting the subject.**

     Aristotle seems consider conventionalism of values, and relativism of goods (1094b15-20).

     He then admits to aim to argue for what counts as good "usually" but not "universally". We should not try to produce argument of high scientific standards.

     He comes back to this point at the end of **chapter 7**:

– About the issue of the degree of exactness, he makes an analogy with the difference in degree of exactness respectively required by a carpenter and a geometer regarding the determination of a right angle.

– He further explains that we might be happy to "prove that something is true without explaining why it is true" – in particular in the case of origins, where the infinite regress presumably threatens.

The point is that Ethics is not an exact science. The carpenter analogy indicates that exactness is not required for action-oriented sciences. The second argument goes further: there seems to be, in principle, no way of rationally founding ethical science.

2. **A restricted audience:** the well-educated and mature. Kids, immature, and uneducated cannot study ethics.

Ethics is only beneficial to the one is "guided by reason in forming [his] desires and in acting" 1095a10. Good education and good habits are the necessary condition of learning about true ethical action.

- Discussion:

Three worries about the text:

1. Is this methodology implying that there is **no rational foundation for Ethics?** Contrast with Plato.

2. Is it implying that our values depend on our education?

3. Is it implying that Aristotle's methodology will always favor the set of values accepted at a time?

To sum up in a single question: Is it impossible for a young 18th century German, Georgian, or Afghan young boy or girl to think that all human beings, white and black, women and men, are equal?

Note that Aristotle warns us about the fact that a better answer to these issues should come later in the book. This is but a first, rough, statement about what links happiness to virtues.

Most of all, be careful here: **The idea that the Ethics has no absolute rational foundation does not necessarily involve that Ethics is arbitrary or purely conventional.** Nor does it involve

that there is nothing objective about it. It just involve that **we** do not possess any rational foundation of it. Let us see this in more details.

Another readings, probably more accurate, and for which we should have a look at 1095a30-1095b15, where Aristotle:

- restates the need for good education

- but makes a point about education and learning: There is a case to make for learning from the "unconditional origin", that is to say, the principles and then from proceeding in pure deductive manner. **That said, when that option is not available, for lack of knowledge of the principle, then the only option remaining is to start from "what is known to us", even if it is not rationally founded and only based on experience.**

As said before, we begin to study ethics armed with a bunch of feelings, habits, preferences and opinions, acquired by experience from childhood up to now. **Good education is a warrant that, among these experiences, we have also experienced virtue and excellence and appreciated them.** Yet we desire a deeper understanding of what they are and why they are valuable. **As adults, we would like a sound plan to live well.** To this aim, we look for a systematized and rational view on ethical matters.

Ethics is going to provide us with a sound plan for life, based on our basic notions of virtue and happiness. It is not going to give an absolute, rational basis to the notions of virtue and happiness. Such a basis is unaccessible for us. That said, **that an absolute rational foundation be not accessible for us does not mean that this foundation does not exist: the limitation is epistemic.** In other words, that the knowledge of X is limited does not imply that there is no fact of the matter concerning X. Example: for centuries, we could not observe the Earth. We had an epistemic limitation (due to technological limitation). That said, the Earth was round ! and it was round independently of us being able to check on it!

So, it could be that there is a fact of the matter about the good, virtue, and happiness. This is compatible with Aristotle's point that we have no access to it, and hence that there is no rational foundation to Ethics.

A consequence of such non-foundationalist view is that Aristotle does

not address the type of challenge that Plato did in having Socrates discuss with Thrasymachus or Callicles.

Just as any other science, Ethical theory starts of with some assumptions and postulates. Just as mathematics does not try to answer the question of the fundamental origin of numbers and shapes, ethics does not try to answer the question of the fundamental origin of virtue and excellence. These are posited. From there the analysis can follow. Finally, such assumptions and postulates are not deduced but are the common principles, accepted by everyone or almost everyone as well as by every or almost every (non-crazy) expert.

This answers part of our concerns. The concern about the relativity and conventionalism should be kept in mind while reading the remaining of the book.

18.4   The highest end is happiness or well being

18.4.1   Dismissal of the subordinate goods

- **Candidates for being the highest end of our action, happiness:**

  1. pleasure
  2. honor
  3. wealth
  4. virtue

- **Reminder: 3 requirements**

  1. the highest end is looked for its own sake
  2. the highest end is not looked for anything else, that is: it is looked for ONLY for its own sake
  3. all other ends are subordinate to it

- The **common goods** are not good candidates for constituting happiness because they are:

- multiple

- potentially contradictory

- **pleasure** is for grazing animals – doest not satisfy requirement (2): it is not the case that we do everything we do in order to get pleasure

- **honor** is a derivative good: it is judged by others, on the basis of virtue. Hence honor is not looked for its own sake – does not satisfy requirement (1)

- **wealth**: "the money-maker's life is in a way forced on him" – wealth is a not a good by itself – its goodness depends on the ends it is used for. Wealth does not satisfy any of the requirements!

- **Virtue** alone is not happiness (1095b30-1096a5))

  At least two necessary (but not sufficient) should "complete" virtue to constitute happiness:

  1. action (someone virtuously asleep in not happy)

  2. satisfaction of the subordinate goods (pleasures, honor and wealth and also beauty and friends)

- **Discussion:**

  – **About 2.: Contrast with Plato:** Aristotle claims that no one can truly argue for Plato's idea that virtue is sufficient for happiness, "except to defend a philosopher's paradox" (this is not very nice...).

  According to Aristotle, the subordinate goods (wealth, power, beauty and friends) are in some sense necessary to actualize of happiness. They are not constitutive of happiness, but a poor, ugly and lonely man will have less opportunities to act according to reason and virtue, and hence to be happy.

  – **About 1.: Note that happiness is not a *state* of the soul, but a special kind of *activity*.** This is saying that a necessary condition of happiness is action: *Sleeping Beauty is not happy!*. Contrast this with the icon of the **hermit in the mountain**, lost in thought.

- Aristotle comes back to these two points in chapter 8:

  - About 1., he provides an analogy:

    And just as Olympic prizes are not for the finest and strongest, but for contestants, since it is only these who win; so also in life only the fine and good people who act correctly win the prize

  - About 2.:

  * happiness as rational activity with virtue is pleasant by nature and by itself

  * pleasure does not come as an additional ornament

  Remember the beginning of the *Metaphysics*! "All human beings desire to know" – so to seek knowledge and to act rationally is to satisfy a natural desire. **Hence virtue produces pleasure naturally** and by itself.

- **Consequence of 2.: link between happiness and "good fortune"** – A consequence of the subordinate goods being necessary to happiness is that there are some conditions for happiness that are chancy. However, taking the opportunity to be happy is not chancy: this is all our responsibility.

18.4.2   Happiness: the only good that satisfies all requirements

- **Identification of the highest end: *eudaimonia* (1095a20).**

  - What means *eudemonia*? It is to be understood as *eu zen*, well living, and not as well favored by some spirit or deity (Kraut). Another translation is "flourishing". We are going to see later that it is of high importance that happiness is understood that way in Greek. (work for yourself: what do you understand by happiness?)

- Three requirements:

  1. chosen for its own sake

    2. chosen only for its own sake

    3. always stands as the final goal of all other subordinate goals

- Aristotle claims that **only *eudaimonia* satisfies the requirements** (1097b1).

  - Possessing the *instruments* or means of happiness is necessary but not *sufficient*. Typically, wealth is necessary but not sufficient: it is not chosen for its own sake

  - Pleasure, Honor, and Virtue are chosen for their own sake *but not only* for their own sake, and *not every action* is directed to obtaining them

    > Anyhow, we regard something as self-sufficient when all by itself it makes a life choiceworthy and lacking nothing; and that is what we think happiness does

Now, we need to know what happiness consists in.

18.5   The function argument(1097b22-1098a20)

- **Assumption for finding the best good:**

  - *the best good for human beings depends on the function of human beings* – Note the "perhaps": still no absolute foundation!

  - Analogy with craft and "whatever has a function or a characteristic action": the good depends on it. What is good for a sculptor *qua* sculptor is to be a good sculptor!

  SO: IF human beings possess a function *qua* human beings, the ultimate good or happiness for human beings depends on that function.

  It remains to see whether or not human beings possess such a function.

- **Human function:** we are looking for what specifically characterizes human beings, what differentiates humans from other beings

  - **nutrition and growth**: shared with all living beings

  - **sense-perception**: shared with all animals

  - By elimination, the only thing remaining is: "**action of the part of the soul that has reason**"

- Reasonable actions in turn come in two kinds, according to the part of the rational soul it comes from:

  (1) actions that requires reason – action of the part of the soul that obeys reason – when the appetitive part of the soul is tamed

  (2) actions that expresses reason – action of the part of the soul that has reason by itself

  See chapter 13 for more on this parts of the souls

  The argument draws on the Psychology and Biology, where Aristotle distinguishes different levels of souls: nutritive, dynamic, perceptive, and rational.

- **From the function to the good:**

  - function of X = function of the excellent X (example: X=harpist)

  - function of the excellent X = to actualize its function well, that is, with virtue

  Application to humans:

  - human function = rational activity

  - excellence in being a human = rational activity with virtue

  Aristotle concludes that: the best good for human beings is to actualize their specific function as human beings, that is rational activity, with virtue.

  How did he come to this? All we can conclude from the previous argument is that to be an excellent human being is to act rationally with virtue, or, in Kraut's terms: "if we use reason well, we live well as human beings". Now how do we connect this with the highest good and happiness? How do we conclude that happiness is but to use reason well?

  What is missing is the link: happiness and the highest good for humans = living well as humans.

  This is what the first assumption amounts to! the good for humans depends on the function of humans in the following sense: the human good is to actualize its specific function well (or with virtue if you wish). Living as humans is both natural and right for human beings.

> Man deprived of perception and mind is reduced to the con-
> dition of a plant; deprived of mind alone he is turned into
> a brute; deprived of irrationality but retaining mind, he be-
> comes like God (from *Exhortation to Philosophy* quoted in
> D.S. Hutchinson "Ethics", *Cambridge Companion to Aristo-
> tle* p.196)

This is, of course, consistent with his metaphysics: as indi-
vidual substances, we are part of the fundamental constituents of the
world. Moreover, what makes us what we are is more our form than
our material constitution, that is to say, what makes us what we are is
that we are human beings. Now, ethic is about how to lead the best
life. Aristotle's answer is that we will lead the best life if we live the
best life for human beings! Having identified that what makes human
beings what they are is rationality, then our best life is to be excellent
at acting rationally !

- **Discussion questions:**

  1. Aristotle thus seems to assume that the good, as aimed at in your
     action, is of the same kind of the good, as realized through well
     functioning, or flourishing. Is the identification legitimate?

  2. How does Aristotle's account of virtue and happiness compare
     with Plato's definition of virtue as a specific kind of relationships
     between the different principles of the soul?