Phil 104, Monday, August 30 and September 1, 2010
Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, I

Background

Aristotle's work is both indebted to and opposed to the views of his teacher, Plato. Very, very roughly, Aristotle is more respecting of ordinary opinions, less given to metaphysical extravagance (the "Forms"), and less inclined to see virtue as a matter of theoretical knowledge (like math). Nevertheless, he shares Plato's belief in the possibility and importance of knowledge, reason, and virtue, and Plato's opposition to sophistry, relativism, and materialism.

Aristotle lectured on every subject of knowledge of his day: physics, meteorology, biology, psychology, logic, rhetoric, poetry, political science, metaphysics, etc. Accordingly, he dominated the intellectual culture of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic worlds for centuries after this death. The history of rise of modern science is largely the story of Western culture's release from the Aristotelian worldview.

His views, especially about the physical world, are, for us, extremely strange—difficult to get our minds around, let alone to accept. Why then care about *his* arguments? For one thing, because it helps us see more clearly what *our* assumptions and problems are.

Aristotelian natures

Our worldview, roughly: Ultimately, the universe is made up of certain fundamental constituents (e.g., particles, waves, fields, etc.), whose essential properties (e.g., mass, force, spin, etc.) are more or less *quantifiable*, and which obey the same *universal* laws applying in the same way to everything everywhere (e.g., the same *law* of gravity applies to objects on the surface of the earth as well as to the orbit of the planets around the sun). Everything else is ultimately explained in terms of this: how inanimate objects move on earth, how comets and stars travel in space, how organisms grow and function.

Aristotle's worldview, roughly: Qualitatively different basic "natures" of inanimate earthly stuff, heavenly bodies, plants, and animals govern their behavior.

A thing's "nature" is a principle of change that inheres in it: something that it has that explains why it alters—in spatial position or otherwise—in the way it does. Kinds of matter, which for Aristotle are the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water, have natures, as do living organisms.

What governs the growth and functioning of organisms are *not* just the natures that govern the kinds of matter of which they are composed *when that matter is left to itself*. There is *an additional nature*, over and above those that would otherwise govern its matter, that explains why a plant's or animal's matter is arranged in the way that it is and does what it does. The matter in your body, so to speak, obeys *different basic laws* from matter of the same kind in another animal, or plant, or nonliving object.

All natures are equally basic. The natures of living organisms *cannot* be reduced to the natures of the inanimate matter of which they are composed.

Aristotelian functions

- The nature of a thing does not only explain why it *does* what it does.
- It also determines what it *ought* to do. The nature of a thing fixes its function or purpose.
- For Aristotle, this has important ethical and political implications.

Contrast our view:

- Things don't have purposes simply because of the way they are.
- The only functions or purposes in the world are those that *people project onto artifacts*.
- Perhaps *God* also gives things purposes. But this is not a very different view. It agrees that things have purposes only if some *mind*—God's or ours—*imposes* purposes on things.
- The purposes that things have are *arbitrary*. If we (or God) had chosen differently, things would have different purposes.
- Sometimes, when we give biological explanations, we say things that make it *sound like* there are functions and purposes in nature. "The function of the heart is to pump blood."
    - First, this is only a manner of speaking, an indirect way of describing natural selection.
    - Second, these "purposes" are purposes only of organs, not of whole organisms.
    - Finally, we do not generally think that any interesting ethical conclusions can be drawn from these kinds of "purposes."

Aristotle's argument that happiness is the exercise of the virtues

I:2 Abstract definition of the good for man as what we want for its own sake

Aristotle begins with an abstract definition of the good for man.

> If, then, there is some end of the things that we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. (1094a18–23).

A common complaint is that here (and in an earlier passage) Aristotle commits a fallacy.

Response 1: If there is more than one (putative) final end, then the *combination* of them is the (real) final end.

- But what if they cannot be combined?

Response 2: The "statesman" argument.

- The ends of some arts are subordinate to the ends of other, "master" arts. For example, the end of bridle-making is subordinate to the end of military strategy or generalship.
- This is revealed by the fact those who pursue the master art have, in that capacity, the authority to command those who pursue the subordinate art, in that capacity. For example, the general, as a general, has authority to tell the bridle-makers what to do, as bridle-makers: "Make more bridles for my cavalry!"
- Those who pursue the art of politics, or statesmanship, have in that capacity, the authority to command those who pursue any other art.

- Thus, all ends of all other arts (=all other ends?) are subordinate to the end of politics. "It would seem to belong to the most authoritative art and that which is most truly the master art. And politics appears to be of this nature."
- So, there is a unique final end: the end of politics, whatever that is…
- …which, we will see, is the happiness of those living in the polis.

I:4 Everyone agrees that what we want for its own sake is happiness, but some disagree about what happiness is.
Here we see a nice illustration of Aristotle's usual method (from Bk VII, Ch. 1): "We must, as in all other cases, set the observed facts before us and, after first discussing the difficulties, go on to prove, if possible, the truth of all the common opinions…, or, failing this, of the greater number and the most authoritative; for if we both refute the objections and leave the common opinions undisturbed, we shall have proved the case sufficiently."

Aristotle observes that virtually everyone agrees that the thing that we want for itself, that all of our actions aim at, is happiness, or "*eudaimonia*." And indeed this still seems to us a plausible answer. But this agreement is only superficial, since people disagree about what happiness is.

Problems with the common views that happiness is…
- …*wealth*: Happiness is supposed to be something that we want for itself. But we don't want wealth for itself.
- …*pleasure*: "slavish," "suitable to beasts," and accepted by the "vulgar." (Keep this in mind when we get to Sidgwick, who thinks that pleasure is the only plausible answer!)
- …*honor*: First, happiness is supposed to be "something of one's own and not easily taken from one." But honor is bestowed on you, if it is, by other people. Second, most people want to be honored only *for their virtue*.
- …*possession of virtue*: One might *possess* the virtue, but never *exercise* it. One might sleep through one's life. One would not be happy, even though one *possessed* the virtue.

I:7 Happiness is the exercise of the virtues
Aristotle offers some theoretical considerations in favor of identifying happiness with the good for man.

(i) The good for man is *final*, in the sense that we pursue it *for* itself and not for the sake of something else. (Contrast wealth.) Indeed, it is *most* final, in the sense that we pursue it *only* for itself and not for the sake of something else. (Contrast a single virtue, like temperance.)

(ii) The good for man is *self-sufficient* in the sense that it lacks nothing.

(i) and (ii) are related: if X is not self-sufficient, but could be improved by some Y, then it is natural to think that we seek X not for only its own sake, but as a component of X+Y. And if we pursue X not (or not only) for its own sake, but (or but also) for the sake of Y, then it is natural to think that it lacks something: X with Y is better than X without Y.

This again suggests that the good for man is happiness, since happiness is also both final and self-sufficient.

So far:

the good for man
=some self-sufficient end that we want for its own sake
=happiness.

But what is the good for man?

- In general, the good for any X seems to depend on the function of X.
- Compare: when do we say that an air conditioner is a good air conditioner, or that it is in a good state? When it does a good job of keeping things cool, i.e., when it performs its function well.
- A human being is a good human being or in a good state when that human being performs his or her function well.

But what is the function of a human being?

- Not nutrition and growth, since plants have this too.
- Not perception, since this is shared by animals. The specific function of a human being will be something that plants and animals do not have.
- The remaining possibility is "some sort of life of action of that <part of the soul> that has reason." In other words, the function of a human being is *activity involving rationality*.
- We perform this function well when we exercise the virtues, because the virtues are just dispositions to perform these activities well.

In other words:

the good for man
=performing the function of man well
(because the good for any X is performing the function of an X well)
=performing the activities unique to man well
(because the function of man=the activities unique to man)
=performing the activities involving rationality well
(because the activities unique to man=the activities involving rationality, given that everything else is shared with plants and animals)
=exercising the virtues
(because the virtues=dispositions to perform the activities involving rationality well)

Putting this together with our earlier conclusion:

happiness
=the good for man
(because (i) everybody agrees that it is and (ii) both are complete and self-sufficient)
=exercising the virtues
(by the argument above)

There you have it: happiness=exercising the virtues!

I:8: How this conclusion agrees with common views about happiness

Aristotle's conclusion that happiness is exercising the virtues agrees with the common views that happiness is…

- …*possessing virtue*. Why? Simply because one needs to possess the virtues in order to exercise them.
- …*pleasure*. Why? Because if one *is* virtuous, then one will take pleasure in *exercising* one's virtue.
- …*external means, such as wealth*. Why? Because without them one cannot exercise the virtues.

I:13: There are two kinds of virtue: intellectual and moral

There are two parts of soul involving rationality:

(a) The part that "obeys rationality"

- This kind of rational activity has to do with *choice expressed in action*.
- This distinctively *moral* kind of virtue is the kind of virtue with which we are familiar.
- "Obeys" reason: Our tendencies to choose bad things, although not themselves rational, can be reined in and redirected by reason. Evidence:
    - First, what we choose is influenced by criticism and exhortation.
    - Second, continent people have the same inclinations to do bad things as do incontinent people, but nonetheless resist.
- Aristotle's list of specific moral virtues is quite different from our own. In general, the virtues seem more prudential, less concerned with giving things up for the benefit of other people.
    - He recognizes virtues of courage, justice, and friendship…
    - … but leaves out kindness, humility, and honesty. (He does acknowledge a virtue of truthfulness, but this only has to do with what one says about oneself: not bragging, but not selling oneself short either.)
    - In general, the virtues seem more prudential in character and less concerned with giving things up for the benefit of other people, e.g., not drinking too much, not spending money unwisely, etc.

(b) The part that "has rationality and thinks"

- The kind of rational activity is *intellectual*.
- The virtues that correspond to this kind of rational activity are virtues that make possible *excellence in thought*: principally, "practical wisdom" and "philosophical wisdom."
- We generally do not think that someone's intelligence has much bearing on his virtue.
- But it follows from the argument that Aristotle has given.

Review Questions:

1. Why might Aristotle have assumed that the function of human beings is *special*? Why can't two species have the same function?

2. What is incorrect about describing Aristotle's position as that happiness is *having* the virtues?

3. Would Aristotle agree that Forrest Gump was a good person, or was capable of a happy life?

4. Why was Newton's discovery of gravity—that the same thing that explains why apples fall from trees also explains why heavenly bodies move as they do—so revolutionary for a scientific culture bred on Aristotle's views?

5. What fallacy is Aristotle alleged to commit in the first two chapters of book I?

6. Why is it more plausible that happiness is "final" and "complete" than that wealth or honor is? Illustrate with examples.