Phil 104, Monday, September 13, 2010
Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X: 7–9 (with summary of VI)

Parts of the soul:

1. Irrational
2. Rational
    a. Obeys reason: Moral virtue
    b. Has reason: Intellectual virtue
        i. *Practical intellect*: *partly* concerns what is contingent, particular, changing.
            1. *Art*: *making* something (other than an action itself) on the basis of correct calculation. Focused on some *specific* end: e.g., medicine.
            2. *Practical wisdom*: *acting* on the basis of correct deliberation. Takes into account *all* of the relevant ends.
        ii. *Theoretical intellect*: concerns *only* what is necessary, universal, eternal.
            1. *Scientific knowledge*: *proving*, from first principles, what is necessary and universal.
            2. *Intuitive reason*: *grasping* those first principles themselves
            3. *Philosophic wisdom*: scientific knowledge + intuitive reason "of the things that are highest by nature." Its *exercise* is *contemplation*.

What is the relationship between practical virtue and practical wisdom?

- *Virtue* sets the end, *practical wisdom* finds the means.
- *Cleverness*: a faculty of selecting the means to our end, whatever it is.
- *Practical wisdom* is the faculty of cleverness in the right state: with the correct end.
- *Virtue* puts the faculty of cleverness in the right state, by giving it the correct end: ultimately, *happiness correctly understood*.

Some questions:

1. Is practical wisdom simply a matter of cause-and-effect reasoning?

Response: If one thinks of the end (=happiness) as *pleasure* or *wealth*, then practical wisdom indeed looks little more than skill at figuring out what will *cause* pleasure or wealth. However, means to an end need not *cause* the end; they can also help to *constitute* it. And for Aristotle, the end (=happiness) is the *exercise of the virtues*. So, practical wisdom is essentially a matter of being able to see what *constitutes* exercising the virtues in the particular circumstances one faces: to discern from the welter of details exactly what *counts as* the virtuous response.

2. If virtue provides the correct end, does that mean that virtue involves having an *articulate, general* account of what happiness consists in, of the sort that Aristotle's lectures aim to give?

- If so, then virtue would be uncomfortably close to being a kind of *theoretical* knowledge.
- But if not, how is virtue different from simply being inclined to do the right thing in each *particular* situation, and so how is it different from practical wisdom?

Response: It is not surprising that Aristotle finds it hard to keep virtue and practical wisdom separate, if practical reason is a matter of applying in specific situations the conception of happiness that virtue provides. After all, it's hard *in general* to distinguish *having a concept* from being able *to apply it in particular instances*.

3. In what sense does Aristotle accept a version of Socrates's doctrine of the "unity of the virtues"?

Response: The virtues are not all the *same*, but possessing one virtue, practical wisdom, *entails possessing* of all the virtues.

- In order to have practical wisdom, one must be oriented to the right end. So if one lacks any particular virtue, then one will (to that extent) lack practical wisdom.
- Particular situations involve all sorts of competing considerations. Being able to see what the right thing to do in any particular situation requires sensitivity *to all of them*.

4. Does this mean that there is no rational selection of ends? (Compare Hume.)

Happiness as contemplation

"If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue." This turns out to be contemplation, which is the *exercise* of philosophic wisdom. Why?

1. Contemplation is the activity of the thing that is most *us* [sic].
    - But isn't our *composite* nature most us? After all, that separates us from *both* the gods and brutes. But then shouldn't the life of *practical* virtue be most us?

2. Contemplation is the *most pleasurable* activity: pleasures "marvelous for their purity and their enduringness"

3. Contemplation is the activity of the *best* and *most divine* thing in us.

    "We assume the gods to be above all other beings blessed and happy; but what sort of actions must we assign to them? Acts of justice? Will not the gods seem absurd if they make contracts and return deposits, and so on? …. Now if you take away from a living being action, and still more production, what is left but contemplation?"
    - This certainly wasn't the *ordinary* Greek view of the gods!
    - God's activity, as Aristotle understands it, doesn't involve *research* or *inquiry*. God already knows. All God does is review the proofs over and over.

4. Contemplation is the *most continuous* activity.

5. Contemplation is the *most self-sufficient* activity. Both the philosopher and the statesman need the necessities, but the philosopher needs nothing more, whereas the statesman needs the *situations* in which he can exercise his virtues, e.g., "people towards whom and with whom he shall act justly."

6. Contemplation is the *most final* activity. "[T]his activity alone would seem to be loved for its own sake; for nothing arises from it apart from the contemplating, while from practical activities we gain more or less apart from the action."

7. Contemplation is the *most leisurely* activity.

This means, by contrast, that a life spent exercising the *practical virtues* is somehow *inferior* or *subordinate to* a life of contemplation: "in a secondary degree… happy."

Question: Why "secondary"? Why not say instead that happiness consists in exercising *all* of the virtues, both practical and intellectual? Isn't that what the function argument would suggest?

Closely related question: What does "secondary" mean?

One answer: Exercising the practical virtues is merely a *means* to contemplation?

Problems:

i. Earlier, Aristotle argued that practical virtues are exercised *for their own sake*.
ii. Sometimes *not* exercising the practical virtues better serves contemplation (e.g., robbing a bank so you can retire and spend the rest of your life contemplating).

Another answer:

- When confronted with conditions that require it, we indeed exercise the practical virtues for their own sake. For example, when our city is under attack, we defend it because that is the noble thing to do; when there are disputes over property, we adjudicate them justly because that is what justice requires; and so on.
- However, we don't seek the *conditions* that call for exercising the practical virtues. Indeed, it would be better if such circumstances—war, conflict, etc.—*never* arose.
- By contrast, we do seek the conditions for *contemplation*: peace, domestic tranquility, etc. So if we ask, "What is the best life?" and don't take certain circumstances as given, but instead think about what the best—most to be sought after—circumstances would be, then contemplation does seem to be singled out over practical virtue.
- It is not clear how this makes sense of 1–2. But it makes some sense of 3–7.

The turn to politics:

"But it is difficult to get from youth up a right training for virtue if one has not been brought up under right laws; for to live temperately and hardily is not pleasant to most people, especially when they are young. For this reason their nurture and occupations should be fixed by law; for they will not be painful when they have become customary."

Thus, the problem of ethics needs a political solution. So this leads Aristotle right into his discussion of politics…

Review Questions:

1. What is true of ends A and B if both A and B are "final," but B is "more final" than A?

2. When Aristotle urges us to "as far as we can, make ourselves immortal" (X:7), how does he propose that we "make ourselves immortal"? Does he mean: make ourselves remembered forever by our virtue? If not that, then what?