

## Phil 114, January 18, 2006

**Aristotle** (384–322 B.C.E.):

- lectured on every subject of knowledge of his day: physics, meteorology, biology, psychology, logic, rhetoric, poetry, political science, metaphysics, etc.
- 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 Aristotlean worldview.

### **Aristotelian natures**

*Our worldview, roughly:* Ultimately, the universe is made up of certain fundamental constituents, with more or less quantifiable properties, which obey certain universal laws (laws which apply in the same way to everything everywhere). 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.

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).

*I:4 Everyone agrees that what we want for its own sake is happiness, but some disagree about what happiness is.*

*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 *complete*, in the sense that we pursue it for itself and not for the sake of something else.
- (ii) The good for man is *self-sufficient* in the sense that it lacks nothing.

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

But what is the good for man?

- In general, the good for any X seems to depend on the function of X.
- 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?

- What is special to human beings—not shared by plants and other animals. (Why?)
- This leaves: *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 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: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.

(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 consist in *excelling in thought*.

### **The relation of man and state**

*First*, Aristotle seems to suggest that the city itself has a nature and purpose.

- The city “is natural” (1252b30) and “exists by nature” (1253a1).
- We believe that the state has a purpose, but this is because the state is an *artifact*, a human invention intended to serve a certain function.

*Second*, Aristotle says that “a human being is by nature a political animal” (1253a3).

- Not just that we like one another’s company.
- It is part of our nature to think about and discuss what is just and unjust, which makes sense only in the context of a city.

*Third*, Aristotle says that the city is naturally prior to individual human beings.

“Further, the city is naturally prior to the household and to the individual, since the whole is necessarily prior to the part. For if the whole animal is dead, neither foot nor hand will survive, except homonymously, as if we were speaking of a stone hand.”

Does this mean...

- the interests of the state come first?
- a human being cannot *survive* without a city?
- a human being cannot *realize his function* outside of the city?

*Instrumental* reading:

1. To fulfill his function, man must exercise the virtues.
2. One of these virtues is the intellectual contemplation.
3. The exercise of this virtue requires certain material conditions (e.g., leisure time).
4. These material conditions are available only within the city.
5. Therefore, the exercise of the virtues is possible only within the city.
6. Therefore, to fulfill his function, man must be part of the city.

*Constitutive* reading:

1. To fulfill his function, man must exercise the virtues.
2. One of these virtues is the virtue of justice.
3. The virtue of justice, given the virtue that it is, can be exercised only within the city.
4. Therefore, to fulfill his function, man must be part of the city.

### **Natural slavery**

*Finally*, Aristotle claims that it is legitimate for some human beings to be enslaved to others.

- Because some human beings are by their nature slaves, and others by their nature masters.
- Slaves are those who have the capacity to receive orders, but not the capacity to issue them. They can be told what to do, but they cannot decide what is to be done.
- The slave and master appear here to be analogous to the two parts of soul involving rationality that Aristotle distinguishes in *Ethics* I:7: the part that obeys rationality and the part that has rationality and thinks. Just as, within the soul, the latter has natural authority over the former, so too, in a household, the master has natural authority over the slave.
- Aristotle doesn't think that everyone who *is* a slave *ought* to be a slave. Some are slaves by “convention and force,” rather than by nature.
- But he did seem to think that there was a case to be made for slavery and that the case applied in at least some instances.