

Aristotle's Ethics [Preliminary]

Course Description

The course offers a high-level survey of central themes in Aristotle's ethics: happiness, motivation, agency, excellence, deliberation, pleasure, responses to relativism, and the nature of ethics. Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* begins with the idea that agents aim to have their lives go well. Aristotle's starting-point for ethical theory are questions that arise from the perspective of agency. These include the question "what to do?" as well as broader questions, such as "what do I want for my life?" and "what would a good life look like?" In addressing these kinds of questions, agents encounter what Aristotle calls difference and variability. As he puts it in *NE* I.3, there is much divergence in how people live and what they consider good. Nothing seems to be stably good or bad. Things like courage or wealth, usually conducive to a well-going life, can turn out to be harmful. How then can there be any account of a good life? Or is the attempt to understand what makes life good a confused and hopeless endeavor?

In starting out with these questions, the course moves away from a prominent trend in Aristotle scholarship that focuses on practical wisdom, *phronēsis*. Recent scholars tend to ask how the *phronimos*—the person who is excellent at deliberation—decides what to do. This question is fairly similar to a question that modern moral philosophy studies, seeking criteria for right and wrong action. Accordingly, philosophers have wondered how different Aristotle's concerns are from the concerns of modern moral philosophy. Anscombe famously argues that, inspired by Aristotle, ethicists should turn to psychology. Williams and others propose that Aristotle does not seem to be concerned with 'morality' at all. McDowell and others argue, on the contrary, that Aristotle provides answers to some of the questions that moral philosophers address.

The working hypothesis for the course is that the *Nicomachean Ethics* is an attempt to provide an account of what it means to live a good human life. Motivation and agency are central topics for this kind of ethics; pleasure, beauty, and their relation to goodness must be understood; and ethics borders on metaphysics because agents must ask what is possible, whether the impossible can in any sense be pursued, and what it means that actions are contingent.

Readings

Sarah Broadie's and Christopher Rowe's edition of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (OUP 2002). Readings from the scholarly literature and contemporary ethics are available via Courseworks/Butler Library. We'll also discuss chapters of a book—tentatively entitled *Desiring the Good*—that I'm currently working on.

Requirements

- No prior study of ancient philosophy required.
- Undergraduate students must get the instructor's permission.
- Students either write one term paper or three shorter papers.
- Students are expected to read the texts closely prior to the class in which they are discussed, and to contribute actively to in-class discussion.

Outline of Readings

Week 1: Motivation is for the good

According to the first sentence of the *NE*, all human activity seeks some good; therefore the good is rightly said to be that at which all things aim.

— Assuming that this is not a fallacy, but a programmatic statement, what does it say?

- Why assume that there is one good ('the' good) at which all things aim?
- Is this a version of the Socratic Paradox, that everyone desires the good?
- How does the argument in NE I proceed, so as to establish that there is one ultimate good?

Reading: Book I of the NE.

Additional readings: Sarah Broadie, Ethics with Aristotle, Chapter 1; Vogt, "The Good is the Good Life"; papers on the Guise of the Good by David Velleman and Joseph Raz.

Week 2: Agency and psychology—Anscombe's Aristotle

In "Modern Moral Philosophy," Anscombe argues that there is a stark difference between Aristotelian ethics on the one hand and modern moral philosophy on the other. She considers notions like duty as remnants of a monotheistic culture, which no longer make sense to us (or: should no longer make sense to us), and suggests some kind of return to Aristotle. Aristotle's ethics begins, as we saw, with ideas about agency and motivation. Anscombe thinks that, similarly, we should turn to psychology before pursuing anything else in ethics. We take her paper as an occasion to ask the following questions:

- Why is the study of motivation and agency at the center of Aristotle's conception of ethics?
- Does ethics as Aristotle understands it include psychology?

Reading: Anscombe "Modern Moral Philosophy," NE I and NE II.1-6 with focus on pleasure and pain.

Additional readings: Plato's Philebus on the role of psychology in ethics.

Weeks 3-4: The nature of ethics

According to NE I.3, ethics has its own kind of precision, reflective of its subject matter. Agents aim to lead good lives in a domain that has a distinctive metaphysics: whatever happens could happen otherwise.

- What does it mean to say that ethics studies things that can be otherwise?
- What are for-the-most-part domains?
- Why is it that ethics must respond to difference and variability?
- How does Aristotle's theory of the mean improve upon relativism?
- Agency and modality.
- Future contingents.

Reading: NE I.3 and NE II.1-6 with focus on "relative-to-us."

Additional readings: Selections from the Theaetetus on relativism. Relativism in present-tense and future-tense assertions. Aristotle on history; Analytics on modalities and future contingents. David Reeve on for-the-most-part domains. Vogt, "The Subject Matter of Ethics: A Metaphysical Reading of NE I.3."

Week 5: Action, decision, and the voluntary

Book III of the NE lays out distinctions between different kinds of actions and our responses to these actions. It greatly shaped scholastic and legal reasoning about accountability, praise and blame, and so on.

- What is voluntary action?
- How does Aristotle's conception of action compare to today's conception of intentional action?
- Agents as causes.
- Does Aristotle address the question of freedom and determinism?

Reading: NE III

Additional Reading: Michael Frede, A Free Will, Sather Lectures (2011); Sarah Broadie, "Alternative World-Histories," in her Aristotle and Beyond (CUP 2007); TBA.

Weeks 6-7: Deliberation—the moral philosopher's Aristotle

In his landmark book *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Hackett, 1975), Cooper complains that Aristotle does not properly signal when he speaks of moral reasoning. Cooper considers moral reasoning a

subset of practical reasoning and proceeds to analyze what we can take Aristotle to say about moral reasoning. In effect, Cooper thus pushes back against Anscombe. Instead of emphasizing the difference between Aristotle's ethics and modern moral philosophy, he aims to find Aristotle's contribution to moral philosophy. Similarly, McDowell speaks of moral reasoning when reconstructing Aristotle's conception of deliberation. Jointly, Cooper's and McDowell's contributions initiated and continue to sustain a major trend in Aristotle scholarship. We'll approach the question of whether to side with Anscombe, or Cooper/McDowell, or neither of them, through a close reading of *NE VI*.

— Why it may be best to think of *aretê* not as 'virtue' but as 'excellence'.

— In which sense is knowledge a virtue?

— In which sense is 'being good at deliberation' a virtue?

— What is deliberation about?

Reading: NE VI

Additional Readings: selections from Cooper, Reason and Human Good in Aristotle; McDowell, "Virtue and Reason" and "Aristotle's Moral Psychology."

Week 8: The life of *theoria*

One stumbling block for the moral philosophy approach to Aristotle is that Aristotle—quite clearly—says that the life of contemplation is the best life. Moral philosophers have long wanted him to say otherwise: as they see it, the contest between a life of character virtue, also called the 'life of politics', and the life of theory should end differently. Virtue ought to be what makes a human life a good life, and a human being deserving of happiness. Much secondary literature has been written on the question of whether Aristotle can be read in an 'inclusivist' fashion, where this means that the life of contemplation includes the virtues of character. The exclusivist reading, however, insists that for Aristotle the life of contemplation and the life of politics are options between which we choose; both are good; but the former is even better.

— What is "*theoria*"?

— How does it relate to other excellences of thought?

— Why is the life of contemplation best?

— Can human beings aim to be gods?

— How does this question relate to the idea that deliberation is about the possible?

Reading: NE X.6-8.

Additional readings: Metaphysics A on the hierarchy of human cognitive activities; selections from Gabriel Richardson-Lear, Happy Lives; TBA.

Week 9: *Akrasia* and the method of ethics

Book VII of the *NE* often serves as an example of Aristotle's so-called endoxic method. Aristotle works through 'endoxa', reputable opinions, aiming to dismiss what seems misguided and to integrate whatever can be saved into his own account. Endoxa are views that deserve our attention because they are held by all, by most, or by some illustrious thinker such as Socrates or Parmenides. *NE VII* on weak will seems to cover views on both ends of the spectrum: what 'we' or 'everyone' thinks, as well as what Socrates thinks, who puts forward some counterintuitive ideas.

— What is the structure of *NE VII*?

— What is Aristotle's conception of *akrasia*?

— Is '*akrasia*' well translated as 'weak will'?

— Is there one endoxic method that Aristotle employs throughout a range of writings?

Reading: NE VII and selections from Topics.

Additional Readings: Papers by Klaus Corcilius, Dorothea Frede, Jonathan Barnes, Richard Kraut.

Week 10: Emotions and pleasure/pain attitudes

Aristotle agrees with Plato that early education importantly includes habituation of one's affective responses. In Plato's terms, the goal is to love the good. With respect to pleasure/pain, the goal is to take pleasure in what one should take pleasure in, and find painful what one should find painful. The virtues of character are essentially the right pleasure/pain attitudes. Emotions have pleasure/pain components. For example, anger involves the pain of a perceived offense and the pleasure of anticipated revenge.

- How does Aristotle define emotions?
- What is the role of judgments in emotions?
- To what extent is Aristotle doing descriptive psychology?
- How does Aristotle conceive of the link between emotion and action?

Reading: NE II.1-6; NE X.9; selections from Rhetorics.

Additional Readings: Myles Burnyeat, "The Truth of Tripartition" (memorial lecture for Bernard Williams, 2005). Christof Rapp. Plato's Republic 2-3. Stoic definitions of emotions.

Week 11: Ethics as a response to contingency—Bernard Williams on 'morality' and ancient ethics

In *Shame and Necessity*, Bernard Williams responds to what he considers too simple oppositions between ancient ethics and modern moral philosophy. He addresses the question of what one should think 'morality' is when asking whether there is such a thing in ancient Greek thought. The title of his lectures refers to the assumption that the ancient Greeks responded to their own wrongdoing with shame, rather than with guilt as is presumably customary in monotheistic cultures. Moreover, by referring to early Greek writers, Williams puts ancient philosophical ethics in a plausible context. We shall use Williams' lectures as a jumping-off point for discussion of the following question: when Aristotle discusses ethics as dealing with 'what can be otherwise', and as an attempt to explain difference and variability, to which extent does he address crucial concerns of early Greek thought?

- Aristotle's alternative to relativism.
- The early Greek preoccupation with human life's instability.
- Contingency and ethics.

Readings: Selections from Bernard Williams, Shame and Necessity; selections from Aristotle's Metaphysics on Protagorean relativism; selections from Herodotus' Histories on the instability of human life. Vogt, "Measure Relativism."

Week 12: The good, the pleasant, the beautiful

The first sentence of the *NE* is programmatic: it states something Aristotle sets out to prove, namely that there is one ultimate good. Though the *NE* and the *Eudemian Ethics* overlap, the *EE* sets out to prove a different claim, one about the nature of different kinds of value. Aristotle says that the good, the beautiful, and the pleasant are three values, but that the same things are good, beautiful and pleasant. In particular, this is true of happiness, which is best, most pleasant and most beautiful. It is unclear whether Aristotle has given up on this when he writes the *NE*, or whether he still argues for this claim.

- The metaphysical question "what is the good?" in *NE I*.
- Does Aristotle argue that good, pleasant, and beautiful play different roles in motivation?
- What is pleasure?

Readings: NE X.1-5 and beginning of EE.

Week 13: Final discussion