

2. The human good

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What is the good? How should we live our lives? These are two of the questions that Aristotle is concerned with in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (abbreviated NE). Since his work has been so influential, we'll start by examining some parts of it. Later on we'll transition into more recent answers to the same questions, and compare them to Aristotle's.

A substantial portion of the first book of NE is devoted to the exposition of his own take on the question what the good is. Crucially, Aristotle thinks that what is good for people is that which constitutes their proper function, and that is *happiness*. This by itself is not very illuminating, so we'll go step by step. On the way, this will help us exercise some basic skills for reading philosophical texts, which in turn will be helpful when you write philosophy.

Let's start with the structure of the text. We can divide the first book in four different parts. First, Aristotle presents a question—what is the good?—and briefly discusses some methodological considerations for answering it. Second, he considers some possible answers to the question he is concerned with that *he doesn't endorse* and tells us what is wrong with those answers. Third, he presents his own answer to the question, and argues for it. Finally, he makes some remarks about the consequences of his view and the puzzles that may arise from it, and introduces some material that will elaborate his view in the second book. The present nodes consider the first two points.

1 Framing the question: what is the good?

Aristotle starts with some intuitive considerations. First, he notes, every action, enquiry, craft, and decision is performed in the pursuit of something. The thing pursued by an action is what he calls an *end*, or *the good* that the action seeks. For instance, the end of the practice of medicine is the health of the patients, and the end of carmaking is the finished car. Early on, Aristotle gives us a short argument to the effect that there are multiple ends, rather than just one: “Since there are many actions, crafts, and sciences, the ends turn out to be many as well”. The conclusion that there are many ends doesn't follow immediately from the premise that there are many actions but it will follow if we add an extra premise (this kind of argument is what is called an *enthymeme*). The resulting argument is this:

- (1) There are many activities (i.e. actions, crafts, sciences, etc.).
- (2) Any two different activities must have different ends; therefore,
- (3) There are many ends.

However, though there are many different ends, Aristotle doesn't think that they are all equally valuable or *choiceworthy*: we choose to pursue some ends merely for the sake of our pursuit of some further end, but other ends we choose because they are valuable in themselves.

Aristotle thinks that ends which we don't pursue for the sake of others are more valuable or choiceworthy. If there is some end that we pursue just for itself, and for the sake of which we pursue all other ends, then that should be the highest end, the best good, or the good for humans. When Aristotle talks about *the good* without qualification, he is talking about that highest end, but this shouldn't be taken to mean that this is also the good for animals, plants, or for everything there is. He calls it *the good simpliciter* because it is the highest good that people should be concerned with.

So when Aristotle asks what the good is, he is asking about the highest good that humans should pursue. This is also the highest good achievable in action: to reiterate, the good for the sake of which we do everything we do, and which we don't pursue for the sake of anything else. This clarifies a part of the question about the nature of the good.

Before examining some answers to this question, Aristotle makes some important remarks about methodology. The first is that we should only require as much precision and generality as the subject matter allows. The second is that the end or goal of our enquiry is action, and not just knowledge.

With respect to the first, we should content ourselves with getting to know what holds *usually* or *for most* people:

[G]oods also vary in the same way, because they result in harm to many people—for some have been destroyed because of their wealth, others because of their bravery. And so, since this is our subject and these are our premises, we shall be satisfied to indicate the truth roughly and in outline; since our subject and our premises are things that hold good usually [but not universally], we shall be satisfied to draw conclusions of the same sort. (1094b17-23)

Aristotle is saying that the facts about what is good for a person are not universal, since things that are generally good for people (e.g. wealth and bravery) can in some cases be bad for certain people. Thus, we shouldn't expect that the study of the good will yield universal truths (truths holding without exception), but only to discover what is true *in general*. This ends Aristotle's framing of the question. Now let's see what he thinks of some answers others have given before him.

2 Some answers, with objections

Aristotle thinks that the highest good is *happiness*. Indeed, he thinks that this is most people's opinion. However, our inquiry can't end here: as Aristotle points out, different people take happiness to be different things:

Some take it [happiness] to be one thing, others another. Indeed, the same person often changes his mind; for when he has fallen ill, he thinks happiness is health, and when he has fallen in poverty, he thinks it is wealth [... Among the wise,] however, some used to think that besides these many goods there is some other good that exists in its own right and that causes all these goods to be goods. (1095a22 ff.)

Aristotle wants to reject some of these conceptions of happiness. That is, he wants to reject the claim that happiness is pleasure or gratification, that happiness is honor, and that happiness is some

sort of thing that exists in its own right, namely, the Idea of the good. He discusses pleasure more thoroughly later, in books 7 and 10.

Aristotle's case against the claim that honor is the ultimate good is brief, but substantial. It relies on an important distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic properties. Roughly, a property of an object is intrinsic if the object has it merely in virtue of how it is by itself. Otherwise, the property is extrinsic. For instance, suppose that John is a certain height, say, 6ft tall. The property of having that height is usually taken to be *intrinsic*. Now suppose that John also has the property of being taller than most people in a certain room. That is an *extrinsic* property, because it depends not only on John's height, but also on the properties of people other than John, namely, their heights.¹

Aristotle claims that honor can't be the ultimate good. For honor depends on the judgments of other people, whereas the ultimate good does not. In other words, honor is had *extrinsically*, whereas the ultimate good is had *intrinsically*:

This [i.e. honor], however, appears to be too superficial to be what we are seeking, for it seems to depend more on those who honor than on the one honored, whereas we intuitively believe that the good is something of our own and hard to take from us. (1095b24)

Let's now consider the view that the good is something that exists in its own right. Let's call that thing which exists in its own right *the Idea of the good*, and the view that the good is that idea of the good the *Platonic View*. Aristotle offers several arguments against this view. The first is somewhat complicated, but very interesting. Unfortunately, examining it in all detail would take us too far afield. So let's consider the other ones.

Let's start with these remarks:

Further, good is spoken of in as many ways as being [is spoken of]: in what it is, as god and mind; in quality, as the virtues; in quantity, as the measured amount; in relative, as the useful [...] Hence it is clear that the good cannot be some common and single universal; for if it were, it would be spoken of in only one [of the types of] predication, not in them all.

As Terence Irwin points out, Aristotle thought that the most general answer to the question what a thing is, is given by pointing out the category to which it belongs. Among other categories, Aristotle considered substance, quality, and quantity.

Aristotle didn't think that any two things in different categories could be subsumed under a more general classification. This is why he thinks there can't be a single property (we'll be assuming that by "universal" he just means *property*) that is shared by all the things that are good: corresponding to each category, there is a thing that is the good in that category, but since the different categories can't be themselves subsumed under a more general class, he thinks that the goods corresponding to the different categories can't be so subsumed either. In Irwin's words, "since the goodness of any thing depends on the kind of thing it is, goodness can be no more a unified property than being is." (Note to book 1, ch. 6, §3).

Here is another argument to reject the Platonic view:

¹It's important not to confuse intrinsic properties with *essential* properties. Properties are said to be essential to an object when that object couldn't have existed without having it. We'll rarely talk about essential properties in this class.

Further, if a number of things have a single Idea, there is also a single science of them; hence [if there were an Idea of good] there would also be some science of all goods. But, in fact, there are many sciences even of the goods under one [type of] predication. [... Hence there is no science of the good, and so no Idea]. (1096a30)

Questions: Do you think this is a good argument? Why?

3 The human good

Aristotle has given us some reasons to reject the previous answers to his main question. Now he is going to present his own view. He starts by presenting some criteria that the good must satisfy:

- The good is the ultimate end. Aristotle thinks that if there is a good (an end) for each action, that end must be that for the sake of which the action is performed. Since we are looking for the good in action *in general*, the good must be the end for the sake of which we perform all other actions; that is, the good (or goods, since he hasn't proved that there is only one) achievable in action.
- The good is complete. According to Aristotle, an end that is pursued in its own right is more complete than an end pursued because of something else. An end that is always pursued in its own right is complete without qualification. It seems natural to think that the ultimate good must be complete in this sense.
- The good is self-sufficient. Something is self-sufficient in Aristotle's sense when "all by itself makes a life choiceworthy and lacking nothing" (1097b15).
- The good is that which is most choice worthy of all goods, and not just considered to be a good among many.

Aristotle thinks that *happiness* satisfies all these criteria. As we'll see, he thinks this result matches well with some common opinions. However, his answer to the question what the good is doesn't end here. For people have different opinions as to what happiness amounts to.

Next, Aristotle will offer a theory of the good. Aristotle has offered some reason to think that the human good is happiness. Now he will try to explain in virtue of what happiness is the human good.