The Good Life: Virtue and Well-Being

The *Nicomachean Ethics* is Aristotle’s seminal work on ethics in general, and it specifically addresses the close relationship between ethical inquiry and politics. At the outset, Aristotle proclaims his purpose of finding the highest good for which virtuous action is undertaken, and the science concerned with this good is political science. Among the sciences, political science is for Aristotle the most authoritative in that it prescribes which sciences should be taught and legislates what must be done and what must be avoided. It also incorporates the ends to which the other sciences are a means and does so not merely for the individual but for the *polis* as a whole.

As Plato’s former student, Aristotle sustains the Platonic dialogue on how society should best be organized and what role the individual should play in that society. However, Aristotle divorces ethical inquiry from the theoretical inquiry associated with Platonic metaphysics; ethics as a field is to stand on its own. For Aristotle, Plato’s Theory of Forms is irrelevant to ethics: “for even if the Good predicated in common is some single thing, or something separated, itself in itself, clearly it is not the sort of good a human being can pursue in action or possess; but that is just the sort we are looking for in our present inquiry.”1 Aristotle’s point of departure is “this-worldly,” meaning his method of inquiry begins from praxis, or experience in the world, from which we come to derive principles on the basis of practical reasoning:

We must examine these common beliefs; but we must not take for granted our first principles, since we are arguing towards them, not from them. (1095a 30)

To argue towards first principles we must begin from common beliefs that are familiar to us. (1095b 2)2

Our familiarity with common beliefs concerning what are good ends for our actions comes from our upbringing for Aristotle; we come to have common beliefs in an unreflective manner before the capacity to reason develops to the degree necessary for ethical inquiry. It is not necessary at the outset that we know why we are just, brave, generous, temperate, truthful, and witty, and Aristotle is more interested in how various virtues might come together into a coherent whole towards a particular end, rather than how each virtue comes to be acquired. We have to begin from somewhere, and it is a source of ethical inquiry that our common beliefs, which have escaped reflexive scrutiny up to a point, often come into conflict concerning what it means to live a good life. This gives rise to practical reasoning in deliberating over what constitutes a good life and what actions lead to it. With age and experience, we come to have different opinions about what are the best ends both amongst and within ourselves at different points in time and in different contexts. Aristotle notes: “Some views are traditional and held by

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2 Ibid, pg. 6, (1095a 30, 1095b 2)
many, while others are held by a few reputable men; and it is reasonable for each group to be not entirely in error, but correct on one point at least, or even on most points.\(^3\)

Although common beliefs with regard to the good are necessary as a starting point, this heteronomy of what constitutes the good makes common beliefs inadequate in the search for the highest good.

For whatever the highest good might be, Aristotle sets out the following criteria: (i) it must be desirable in itself; (ii) it is not desirable for the sake of some other good, and (iii) all other goods are desirable for its sake. Aristotle comes to the conclusion that in meeting his criteria, *eudaimonia*—meaning happiness as well-being or flourishing over a lifetime—is the highest good. Well-being is the highest end, and all subordinate goods and virtues of justice, health, wealth, bravery, generosity, honor, wisdom, and so forth are means sought because they promote the ultimate end of well-being.

For Aristotle, happiness understood as well-being is not a state, as in a state of mind. He comes to argue that happiness consists in the *activity*—sustained over the better part of a lifetime—of the rational part of the soul in accordance with virtue, a part that is specific to human beings, or what he calls the human function:

> What, then, could this be? For living is apparently shared with plants, but what we are looking for is the special function of a human being; hence we should set aside the life of nutrition or growth. The life next in order is some sort of life of sense-perception; but this too is apparently shared, with horse, ox and every animal. The remaining possibility, then, is some sort of life of action of the part of the soul that has reason.\(^4\)

Like Plato, Aristotle argues that the highest good consists in the dominance of reason. Both Plato and Aristotle were rationalists in the sense that what constitutes virtuous action is dependent upon the role of reason both in perceiving what is virtuous and allowing us to act accordingly and often contrary to impulses or desires. But again, although Aristotle might arrive at conclusions at least in part like Plato’s, he attempts to do so without relying on Platonic metaphysics. Aristotle’s reasoning with regard to ethical inquiry is *situational*, meaning an individual’s capacity for reasoning is necessarily to a degree dependent upon and responsive to the world and society in which it operates.

To explain, consider the virtue of justice, both in terms of a just individual and of a just society. Recall from sub-subunit 1.5.2 the antagonism between what Professor Smith calls two permanent and irreconcilable moral codes constitutive for a *polis*. The first code is built upon Socrates’ notion of an individual’s sovereign reason fostered through philosophical discourse with others in pursuit of self-perfection. It is through philosophical reasoning that we come to know truth, or things as they are in Plato’s world of Forms. The second code consists of the established law and customs of the *polis*, which takes priority over individual conscience in the form of what might be called

\[^3\] Ibid, pg. 20, (1098b 28)
\[^4\] Ibid, pg. 16 (1098a)
an ancient precursor to the notion of a social contract. In the *Crito*, Socrates presents an effective defense of social contract theory or the second code, while in the *Apology* and in the *Republic*, he seems to advocate the first code. According to Smith, the two codes are irreconcilable: you can have one or you can have neither, but it is not possible to have both.

Also, recall that justice is represented by Glaucon in Book II of the *Republic* as something one would not want to follow if one did not need to. Justice is no more than the product of a convention adopted by a group of people to protect themselves—a contractual device of the weak to make themselves strong and an instrument for the satisfaction of selfish desires that exist naturally, independent of any ethical outlook. Socrates is presented with this argument and spends the better part of the rest of the *Republic* attempting to strike it down in showing that it is rational for people to be (or want to be) just, whoever they are and whatever their circumstances. Justice should be sought for its own sake, independent of its consequences.

What fails under the contractual picture for Plato is that it identifies what is ethically basic (in this case, justice) with the public notion based in custom of what justice is and the procedural conventions of how it should be administered. In a sense, justice is outsourced yet colloquially so; it is external to the self and not a transcendent objective to be pursued as part of the individual quest for self-perfection through philosophical reasoning. For Plato, what is first ethically desirable would have to be something that resides in the individual soul. The demand to show to each person that justice is rational for that person means that the answer has to be grounded first in an account of what sort of person it is rational to be. The just individual is someone whose soul is guided by a vision of the good per Plato’s *Theory of Forms*—someone in whom reason governs passion and ambition through such a vision. When this is the case the soul is in equilibrium, and individual justice consists in such a state of the soul. Actions are then just if they sustain or are consonant with such equilibrium, and a society comprised of such individuals makes for a just society. Such a society is permeated all the way through with justice, while a society under the contractual picture is one of possibly just and/or unjust individual souls corralled by a contract perceived as a necessary constraint upon human action.

This brings us back to Aristotle’s highest end as well-being attained through a life of action on the part of the soul that has reason. Socrates believes that the discipline of philosophy could uniquely lead to well-being through its power to develop virtues like that of justice not only in the individual, but through an incremental transformation of the polis as a whole—just individuals making for just societies. Rational philosophy is to provide the insight that leads to well-being. It might be said that Aristotle’s outlook is less ambitious. He tries to base ethics on social considerations of well-being and of a life worth living, an approach that is both more accommodating to particular situations, and more flexible in its lack of specificity or rigidity. Aristotle anchors what it means for

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a person to be just in situational factors that are largely external to that person, and it is for that individual’s powers of practical reason to recognize and assess those situational factors. The virtue of a just soul is treated as a matter of a person being disposed to respect and promote just social arrangements where individuals receive benefits according to their merits or virtue. Justice as a good in itself, outside of social arrangements and consequences, is meaningless to Aristotle. What is just is determined by practical reason, and practical reason requires a context in which to operate. Again, to return to Aristotle’s approach to ethics as a field unto its own, Aristotle makes a basic distinction among the powers of reason where practical reason serves as the intellectual faculty central to the ethical life, its functions, and objects in sharp relief from the pure reason invoked by Plato’s metaphysics and deployed in other branches of philosophy and the sciences.