A History of Philosophy
14 Aristotle's Ethics
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We started by pointing out that Aristotle's philosophy in every area is a teleological one. That is to say, there are certain natural ends which represent the proper functioning of whatever things we're talking about. Consequently, in order to develop an ethic, what Aristotle does is to talk about the human soul and what its proper functions are.

And that involves distinguishing between the nutritive function, for instance, of what he calls the vegetative soul, the sensitive sensory functions, consciousness, feeling of the animal soul, the rational function of the rational soul, which of course is the distinguishing thing that differentiates the human species among all other things, rational soul. So by virtue of his teleology, it follows that the good is proper functioning, or as he puts it, a complete life in accordance with reason. And in a parallel statement, in accordance with virtue.

Because virtue is simply proper functioning. I don't know if you've noticed this oddity, but when people ask me how I am, I say, "Fine, I'm functional." And they say, "Well, I suppose that's a start."

Or, is that all? To which my response is, in Aristotelian terms, that's very good. Proper functioning. You try it.

Well, the point is that virtue, as Aristotle defines it, is simply good functioning. Functioning aright. Functioning in accordance with the inner telos, the final cause.

You see, of what we are supposedly actualizing of our essentially human potential. Namely, a complete life lived in accordance with reason. So the notion of virtue is really pretty simple in that respect.

The Greek term for virtue, arity, has a broader meaning, perhaps a looser meaning than our term virtue. Arity can simply mean excellence or quality. So a virtuous person is one who has a human quality.

You see, a human quality. A whole life lived in accordance with what is distinctively human. A human quality to life.

Functioning as a human being should function in that sense. Excellence. Keep in mind, then, that virtue has to do with the whole life, both the outward behavior and the inner disposition.

Motivation. Intention. Attitude.

In fact, in talking of virtue, the usual way is to talk of virtues as moral dispositions. Disposition is what disposes you to certain kinds of behaviors. You see? So it's the inner functioning that disposes one to proper external functioning.

In other words, a virtuous person is inner-directed, rather than simply responding to external stimuli. Inner-directed. Out of the, well, out of the heart.

The New Testament phrases. Inner-directed. And the question immediately arises, then, well, if this is proper functioning, how do we acquire proper functions? How do we actualize this capacity for functioning as humans? We have the capacity, the potential.

How is it going to be actualized? And here, there develops Aristotle's emphasis on habit and habit formation. Because a settled disposition is what a recent book called a habit of the heart. You see? A habit of the heart.

So, how do you establish a habit of the heart? It's the obvious question. And when Aristotle addresses that, he's talking about what today we call moral development. A lot of work is going on in moral development theory.

And if it's talking of character development, it's likely to be indebted to what Aristotle says about the development of virtues, because character is just a set of virtues unified in some way. You see? Well, a set of virtues or vices. Good character versus virtues, of course.

And so the question of habit formation, how come that? Well, if we're talking of a complete life lived in accordance with reason, then presumably it has to be a habit, the formation of which has been rationally guided. Or it's not going to be a disposition in accordance with virtue. And so what he talks about, basically, is that there needs to be deliberation and choice.

Decision. That is to say, in one manner or after the other, when a decision is called for, where there are two ways that you should go, more ways you could go, what should I do? Deliberation about the ends that tell us what constitutes good functioning. Deliberation about ends and about the means to those ends.

And a choice in accordance with that deliberation. Now, doing it once does not make a habit. The way he puts it is that, what's his phrase, one sparrow does not a summer make.

Nor does one day. No, but what you need is repeated decisions, repeated choices, repeated choices based on deliberation, again and again and again, until it becomes a mental habit. It's the repeated thoughts, thoughtful action that makes it habitual.

Now, you ask yourself about some of the habits that you have developed. When you drive an automobile, the driving of it has become an unconscious habit. But how did it get to be an unconscious habit? By thinking about what you should do for the proper functioning of an automobile and deciding to do that.

You see, it's true with physical habits, it's true with mental habits, it's true with cultivating discipline of mind, you see. Keep in mind the end, the means to the end, then the decision, and act accordingly. So, habit formation.

Now, at the same time, he sees that there are some people who are going to have trouble with that. Because that sort of habit formation takes self-discipline. Or, if you like, self-control, the virtue of temperance.

How do you get temperance if you don't have it already, and it takes temperance to get temperance? You see the circular problem. That they suffer from what he calls akrasia, weakness of will. They don't have the stick-to-it-edness, the inner resolve, to be able to make the decision and stick by it.

Weakness of will. So, in the case of people, then, who are unable to rule themselves by reason, like young children and others whom he said by nature should be slaves, they have to be ruled by other people's reason, you see. And in childhood training, proper functional habits are instilled simply by discipline.

But that is his recognition of human moral failure, you'll see. In Plato, you remember the issue in terms of the winged horses, is how you control the appetites, the self-willed, the passions, that can't be controlled. They have to be ruled by reason.

And if the individuals are not sufficiently rational to be ruled by their own reason, like the appetitive class of artisans, you see, then they have to be ruled by others. So, Aristotle, in that regard, is very much in Plato's ballpark. But, of course, the question is about how the deliberation goes.

What sort of process is this deliberation that it's able to guide? And the deliberation is such that we seek a mean between extremes. That is to say, if a virtue is a proper functioning of some aspect of the human soul, some aspect of personality, then a given personality characteristic, personality trait, might be in excess, too much, out of balance that way, or might be in deficiency, too little. So, what you want is that quality of life that is neither in excess nor in deficiency, but hits the mean, the rational mean, the balance.

So, the role of deliberation is to find the balance. Now, you can see how that goes if you take a look again at his view of the soul and how you see how the thing works. If we're talking about the vegetative soul, vegetative life, okay, the basic functions are nutrition and reproduction.

And good functioning, in those regards, has as its end physical health. Okay? Physical health is the good. Now, on the other hand, there is the animal soul.

And in this regard, his attention is particularly on the sensitive, sensory functions. That is to say, particularly conscious feelings, emotions, and appetites, the appetitive dimension. And it's the proper functioning here that produces what he labels as the moral virtues.

Moral virtues in which the appetites, the desires, and emotions are in balance. Well, of course, you have the rational soul as well. With its functions of thought and speech, doing art.

And here, what you want as proper functions is the intellectual virtues. Virtues of intellect. And of the virtues of intellect, he distinguishes two.

One is practical reason. I take it back, practical wisdom. And the other is contemplative wisdom.

Okay? Practical reason, contemplative wisdom. Now, about the sensitive life. Feelings, appetites.

Those feelings may be felt too much or too little. Excess, deficiency. What we need is rather to feel whatever we do, desire, at the right times with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way.

Now, that's balance, you see. And that's what you're looking for in deliberation. To feel, for instance, anger at the right time with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way.

Okay? To feel hungry. To feel hungry. To feel hunger.

To be driven by it at the right times, and so on and so on and so forth. So, becomes a matter of monitoring and guiding, controlling the emotional life. Moral virtues.

And, as you've been reading Aristotle, you notice all the various virtues that he talks about. The virtue of courage, for instance, the excess of that kind of characteristic would be foolhardiness. Deficiency, cowardice.

The virtue of generosity. You know, a giving attitude towards people. The deficiency would be miserliness, stinginess.

The excess, profligacy, throwing it around unwisely. You see? And so, the mean between extremes is, in terms of proper functioning, defined as keeping the emotional life in proper balance. Okay? Remember that way back to the pre-Socratics, the notion of what is rational, what is just, what is the proper order of things, is always in terms of balance and proportion.

Okay. So, he develops it in that direction. You might say, well, what is the place of pleasure in the moral life? And he addresses that in a couple of places in his Nicomachean Ethics.

He's explicit that pleasure is not the same as happiness. Happiness, of course, is proper functioning, well-being. Pleasure is more of an emotion, a feeling, you see, which might be had in excess or in deficiency towards the wrong things at the wrong time, and so on and so forth.

The trouble with pleasures is that they are intermittent, they're contingent on external events, largely beyond our control. There are many different kinds of pleasures that are of various moral worth. So, pleasure cannot be the highest good if we evaluate pleasures by some other standard, if pleasures are of varying moral worth.

After all, there is pleasure in going out on the town, and there is pleasure in reading Aristotle. Two things are of varying moral worth, and so forth. No, in reality, his moral psychology is that pleasure is not an end to be pursued, it's more of a by-product, a side effect of actualising certain other ends, you see.

You can be so intent on wondering what you're spending on that delicious meal out is worth it, that when it's all over, you're not sure you enjoyed it. It's in the fulfilling activity as such that the pleasure is found, not in the end, but as an end in itself. It's a fringe benefit.

Well, the other two things, then, that we have to pick up on in this whole business of moral development have to do with the function of government in the place of the arts. Because Plato saw both of these as contributing to the improvement of the soul. So does Aristotle.

In fact, it's characteristic of political theory all the way through until we get to people like Machiavelli. A renaissance, that the function of government has to do with the good, rather than with power, with the good. So Aristotle, then, looks at government in terms of the human telos, you see, and he defines the human being not only as a rational being, but as a social being, a societal being.

By nature we are social beings, he says, and that, what in translation is a phrase, by nature. In Greek, it's just the word fousai, one word. By nature.

Of course, he's loaded with the significance of all his teleology. Everything in nature has its final cause, its telos, its end, you see. By virtue of its nature, its essence, its form.

By nature, humans are social beings. It's of our very essence to be social beings. We're not functioning aright except as societal beings.

We don't function aright in isolation. Aristotle could never have written Robinson Crusoe, you see. Daniel Defoe knew what he was doing.

He was an 18th-century social philosopher in the age of individualism. And you read the critical literature on Defoe, and it all comes tumbling out. What Defoe is picturing is the self-sufficient, rational human being alone on his island, you see, with his goats and his god.

The goats, of course, he domesticates, brings them under the rule of reason, like animals have to be, you see. And when the savages come to have their cannibal feast, he certainly wouldn't have anything to do with them. In fact, he rescues Manfredi, you see, and keeps a stern eye on him until he is sufficiently rationalized that they can have a social contract.

The Spanish sailors come. They're not sufficiently rational. He doesn't trust them.

The English sailors come, the social contract, and the way they sail to a more social life, you see. But Aristotle could never have written that, because the conception of an isolated individual alone on his island, unbeknownst, was social beings, you see. They're social beings with an interdependence, and the human good is only achieved in society by virtue of the proper functioning of society, not just the individual.

Well, in the light of that sort of thing, then, what he tries to do is to develop a conception of an ideal state, and you can anticipate that the ideal state is one that is properly functioning. Properly functioning in the light of the nature of the state and its proper end. In other words, what is a just society? What is a just society? A just society is one that is rationally ordered for the common good.

Which is rationally ordered for the common good. Yeah. What is a just, a good individual? One whose emotions are properly ordered for the common good.

I mean for his good, for the good. So the state, in that sense, is the individual writ large. It has to be properly ordered for the common good, and there the parallel to Plato begins to peter out.

Because you recall that Plato repudiated existing forms of government as unsuited, unjust, and unstable. Aristocracy, democracy, tyranny, oligarchy, none of them work. He therefore set up one and only one kind of political ideal under the rule of philosopher kings.

Now, I suspect it is because Plato's ideal was an ideal that exists only in the transcendent heaven of Plato's forms. For Aristotle, the forms only exist in the world of particulars. Particulars imperfectly actualize the forms.

So there might be various competing imperfect actualizations of the ideal state. You get it? So Aristotle is open to alternative political constitutions. Alternative kinds of things.

He's not interested in what would be the ideal structure of a just society. He's rather concerned about the proper functioning within any kind of society, of family, of education, of the economic institutions, like in his day, slavery and exchange, things of that sort. Proper functioning in terms of the common good.

And inasmuch as his conception of the good is for a complete life in accordance with reason, the kind of education he wants is what we would call a liberal education for a complete life in accordance with reason. You see, touching all areas of life. So Aristotle's political thinking was then very, very clear-headed.

It seems to me that a lot of our thinking in this country about politics is more platonic than it is Aristotelian, in the sense that we tend to think there is only one possible form of a just society, namely one just like the American, rather than recognizing there might be a variety of viable alternatives. Well, what about the arts? What about the arts? Here again, there is an initial and somewhat transitory similarity to Plato when you see that he talks of art as a kind of imitation. But the similarity stops around there.

For Plato, you see, art should imitate the form, the transcendent form. So arts that imitate particulars, individuals, even individuals like Socrates, are twice removed from reality because the individual is just himself, a copy of the form. But as far as Aristotle is concerned, art is not imitation of form but imitation of life, or as it's often translated, and to distinguish it from Plato, this term is good, art is representational, yes, but representation of life, of characters, their emotions.

Fancy imitating their emotions, representing their emotions. That's the very thing Plato warned against in giving of public readings and recitations, imitating other

people's emotions. You see? A representation of characters, their emotions, their actions, because you can only see the universal within the kind of particular, you see? And so art helps you then to bring into focus that cumulative experience so that you say of a character, well represented, yes, aren't we all like that? Aren't we all like that, you see? Because the genius of good art is that it helps you to see something universal within the particular.

Now, in that sense, he finds poetry, which is a form of art, to be more scientific than history. Now, that strikes you as an oddity because we don't think that way, but in his day, he saw history as just narrating particulars, chronicling, not much more, telling stories, whereas poetry, in as much as it captures something universal, you see, is closer to what he calls science, which is theoretical thinking, thinking in terms of universal principles. Now, what we would call art criticism, critique of art forms, art criticism and the criteria for art criticism function with this sort of thing in mind.

Having to do with the effect of the representation of emotions on the audience. So, when it comes to talking about drama, for instance, he lays out appropriate formal characteristics for good drama, he's concerned about the emotional impact. A good tragedy must be such as to produce catharsis, particularly of the emotions of fear and pity, which can so easily get out of balance and rob us of our courage.

Yes, sir. Catharsis is a purging of the emotions, so that in a good tragedy, pity is aroused, fear is aroused, and those emotions then are released in the outcome of the tragedy, and the emotional life is, as it were, cleansed and we're able to, therefore, freed from those emotions for a while, live a life more in accordance with reason. The ideal is certainly less contemplative in relationship to art than Plato, with his contemplation of beauty itself.

Well, I hope you see in, then, political theory and art the way in which his underlying metaphysic produces the results. You remember the diagram we played with, with Plato? Get straight the metaphysics, and the epistemology is, of course, a corollary of that. But how you know depends on what it is you're talking about knowing, you see, and from that, political thought, aesthetics, ethics, educational theory, and everything else tends to follow, and Aristotle is another of these classic cases.

Well, that's what I wanted to say about Aristotle. Now it's your turn, David. For Aristotle, knowing the good wouldn't actually be the same as doing the good because you have much more of a will than a choice.

Yeah, I think that's right. There's no automatic follow-through from knowing the good. You have to choose.

There's more emphasis on freedom of choice in Aristotle. Now, you say knowing the good does not guarantee doing the good, and frequently, you find writers who say

that for Socrates and Plato, knowing the good does mean you can do the good. Yeah, Socrates says something like that at one point, but I don't think that's the whole story, so I don't think that's true even of Socrates and Plato.

And I say that for this reason. If you read Plato's Republic, as of course you're going to, aren't you, one of these rainy days. As you read Plato's Republic, you find that he's talking about preparing people to rule with reason, preparing philosopher kings, wise people, who rule by reason.

It turns out that there are moral prerequisites for knowledge. Now, if there are moral prerequisites for knowing, how can knowing be the thing that makes doing the good possible? Do you get it? It's not until you have learned self-control and gained courage that you're ready to learn dialectic, which is necessary for knowing eternal truth, you see. So there are emotional and moral prerequisites for being able to know, you see.

Now, does that mean that if you know the good, you automatically do the good? Well, not if you take the Phaedrus myth seriously. You can be sawing a loft with your chariot, and the wayward horse can upset the whole contraption, and you flub it. You don't do the good, you see.

So I think if you take the whole platonic picture into account, it's not automatic. If people know what's good, they'll do it. Oh, there's one other strand of thought that goes into that, that Plato isn't talking about a kind of knowledge which is detached and value-free.

He's talking about loving the truth, remember? And it may be that if you really love the truth, you'll do what it requires. They're not knowing in the sense of detached, objective, impersonal awareness. Well, what else about Aristotle? In comparing Plato and Aristotle, I've generally tended to agree with Aristotle as an extension and an improvement upon Plato's thought, but in his regards with morality and his ethics, it seems that he's lost the transcendent moral imperative that Plato had in that it seems like he's pragmatized the whole thing in that transcendent part, the mystic aspect just isn't there, which seems so necessary in morality.

Pragmatism versus mysticism. Yeah, you know, I'll buy your notion, I guess, because I gave it to you, that Plato's ethic is a stimulus to medieval mysticism, but I don't buy the pragmatism thing. You see, pragmatism is defined in terms of the belief of those who coined the term.

Particularly, John Dewey. Pragmatism is the view that we regard moral beliefs and values as simply instruments for achieving temporary objectives. For pragmatism, it's always short-range objectives.

That we're after, rather than anything, any overall good. Dewey is insistent that there is no intrinsic good. Everything is instrumental.

Now, that's not Aristotle. For Aristotle, there is intrinsic good. You see, functioning properly as a human being is intrinsically good.

You see, his notion of the highest good, the supreme good, is first that it must be intrinsically good, not just instrumental, and Dewey would have none of that. Now, I suspect, then, that in posing the pragmatism-mysticism disjunction, what you're doing is saying, with imminent forms, does he have any really universal ideal? You see, those who don't are pragmatists. Well, Aristotle's not a pragmatist, but does he have any universal ideals? Yes, he does.

You don't have to be a Platonist to be an ethical absolutist. You see, what is absolutely good, you see, is living a complete life in accordance with reason, with virtue. You see, the virtues are good.

You ought to pursue the virtues. He's unequivocal about that. Why? Because even though the forms are within particulars, the forms are still universal principles.

You see, you don't have to have transcendent universals to have universals, as long as you have universals. See, the opposite of what is relative is what is universal. You see, Aristotle has that.

Now, if what you're saying is, oh, but he doesn't give us a whole set of absolute rules to live by. No, but he gives us absolute virtues to embody, you see, because his is an ethic of virtue, and we don't get this business of totting out absolute rules to live by in ethical theory until the 18th century. You see, the recognition is that while there are, yeah, universal moral ideals, and certain rules follow from that, if an ethic is a teleological ethic, you have to be end-oriented primarily.

Frankly, I think that's where a biblical ethic is. I think it's end-oriented. You see, you know, biblical morality talks of Christ-likeness as the goal.

You say, yeah, but the Ten Commandments. Yes, indeed, but the essence is, thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul and strength, and thy neighbour as thyself. You see, that's what they're about.

They're simply saying what love means when applied to living a complete life. It means you'll pursue God's purposes in those various areas of moral responsibility. What that means is, there are certain things you won't do.

So, in that sort of sense, I think Aristotle is not a pragmatist. No. Does he have any transcendent being? Yes, he's God.

And so, the good is ultimately tied to the kind of ordered unity which the very being of God maintains, upholds. I didn't mention, perhaps I should have done, that when he's talking of contemplative wisdom, the highest contemplation is contemplation of the one who unceasingly contemplates his own contemplating. Contemplating God, in that sense.

So, he has that platonic note, but without going to the otherworldly direction that later mysticism goes to, which Plato didn't, but later mysticism does. Does that make sense? Do you want to come back to that more? Oh, yeah, probably not. I sometimes find that in an introductory class, where, you know, we have a one-day shot on Aristotle, introductory students will often say, oh, Aristotle's a relativist.

You see, how do they get to that conclusion? Well, because he talks of finding the golden mean, rather than pinpointing exactly what you ought to do. You see, but to say find the golden mean is pinpointing exactly what you ought to do. Namely, translating it into Christian language, use the gifts that God has given you and make up your own mind in the light of all the input you've got.