

**PHIL 31: Ancient Philosophy**  
**Fall 2005; David O. Brink**  
**Handout #8: Aristotle**

Aristotle (384-322 BCE) was a student in Plato's Academy, from about the age of 17 to 37. Though he was clearly influenced by Plato, his philosophical style, concerns, and conclusions are often quite different from those of Plato.

Aristotle's concerns are much broader than those of any of his predecessors. Unlike the Presocratics, Aristotle is interested in a large range of metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical questions; and, unlike Socrates and Plato, Aristotle is interested in a great many formal and empirical studies. Besides being concerned with moral and political theory, the mind-body problem, the nature of knowledge, and the nature of change, Aristotle also studied and wrote about mathematics, formal logic, biology, history, and political science -- e.g. the nature and causes of political (in)stability. Nor was he just an avid consumer of these empirical disciplines; Aristotle and his "graduate students" did a great deal of "lab" and "field" work, gathering and analyzing data about such things as the movements of the stars, animal behavior and anatomy, and political sociology. Indeed, Aristotle is in very large part responsible for identifying and distinguishing these different areas of inquiry; they formed the various "academic departments" in Aristotle's own school, the Lyceum.

**METHOD**

Like Socrates and Plato, Aristotle adopts a dialectical method that begins with and attempts to explain the appearances (phainomena), which include both (a) perceptions and (b) common or respected beliefs.

As in other cases we must set out the appearances, and first of all go through the puzzles. In this way we must prove the common beliefs ... ideally, all of the common beliefs, but if not all, then most of them and the most important. For if the objections are solved, and the common beliefs are left, it will be an adequate proof [NE vii 1 (1145b4-7)].

Though Aristotle borrows the method of Socrates and Plato and, like them, allows for the revision of common beliefs, he seems to think that they are too quick to overthrow common beliefs. This concern with the appearances may account for the fact that Aristotle's conclusions typically seem closer to commonsense and less paradoxical than those of his predecessors.

**SUBSTANCE AND CHANGE**

Like the Presocratics, Aristotle is concerned with change and stability. He is also concerned with primary substances (protai ousiai). Whereas the Presocratics understand substance as matter, and Plato understands substance as form or universal, Aristotle appeals to both matter and form. This leads him to understand the primary substances to be individuals.

Aristotle links substance with change. In Physics i 7 he offers a general account of change. All change involves three elements.

- (a) an underlying subject of change [x],
- (b) a prechange, lack of quality or property [5F], and
- (c) a postchange, possession of quality or property [F].

This structure is present in both qualified and unqualified becoming. Qualified becoming involves nonsubstantial change -- when a single underlying substance (e.g. Socrates) undergoes a change (e.g. from pale to tan). Unqualified becoming involves substantial change -- the coming into or going out of existence of a substance (e.g. when a statue comes into existence from a lump of bronze or Socrates dies). In the case of nonsubstantial change the underlying subject (x) is a substance (e.g. Socrates); it acquires or loses a nonessential property (F) (e.g. paleness). There are two cases of substantial change: in one case the underlying subject (x) is matter (e.g. the lump of bronze) and it acquires a property (F) that is an essential property of some substance (e.g. acquires the form of Socrates); in the other case, the underlying subject (x) is a substance and it loses one of its essential properties (e.g. Socrates loses his mental and physical capacities) and so goes out of existence. As we will see more clearly later, Aristotle thinks that the essential property acquired or lost in substantial change must be formal.

Aristotle's account of the logic of change gives him a reply to Heraclitean claims about radical flux. Radical flux implies that everything is always changing in every respect. But this can't be so if Aristotle is right, for every change presupposes an enduring subject.

Aristotle's account of the logic of change also gives him a reply to Parmenidean arguments that change is impossible.

The first people to philosophize about the nature and truth of things got so to speak side-tracked or driven off course by inexperience, and said that nothing comes to be or passes away, because whatever comes to be must either do so out of something which is, or out of something which is not, and neither is possible. What is cannot come to be, since it is already, and nothing can come to be out of what is not, since there must be something underlying. And thus inflating the consequences of this, they deny a plurality of things altogether, and say that there is nothing but "what is itself" [191a24-33].

Aristotle seems to understand this Parmenidean argument as follows.

1. All change consists in something coming-into-being.
2. For any time  $t$  at which  $Z$  exists, at  $t-1$   $Z$  either exists or does not exist.
3. If  $Z$  did exist at that prior time, then  $Z$  did not come-into-being at  $t$ .
4. If  $Z$  did not exist at that prior time, then  $Z$  must have come-to-be from nothing.
5. But nothing can come-to-be from nothing.
6. Hence, there is no change.

Aristotle wants to reject (4). The argument mistakenly assumes that we need to choose between coming-to-be out of nothing and already existing. If these options were exhaustive, then change would be impossible. Assume that  $Z = Fx$ .  $Z$  cannot come-into-being if it already exists, and  $Z$  cannot come-to-be out of absolutely nothing -- there must be an underlying subject of change, as the Parmenideans recognize, viz.  $x$ . But  $Z$  can come into existence without itself ( $Fx$ ) previously existing; it comes to be out of  $x$  undergoing a property change, becoming  $F$ .

## FORM AND MATTER

The Presocratics (for the most part) identified the arche and primary substances with matter. They understood the basic question

(1) What is x?

as the material question

(2) What is x made of?

(2) can itself be understood in two rather different ways, as

(2a) What things did x come from?

(2b) What is x now composed of?

But Aristotle distinguishes between matter and form and emphasizes the primacy of form. For instance, a statue should be distinguished from its matter (e.g. a quantity of bronze) and should be identified with its form (e.g. shape, design, or function). Aristotle offers three main reasons for the primacy of form.

1. Matter is mere potentiality; form turns mere potentiality into actuality (Phys 193a33-b8).
2. Compositional plasticity; things are individuated by their form, not their matter.
3. Compositional constraints are dictated by form (function) (200b5-7).

(1) The bronze is only potentially a statue of Socrates. It is equally potentially a statue of Stalin. It becomes a statue only when the bronze acquires the form of Socrates. (2) My house survives changes in its matter, provided these new materials continue to support its form (or function). (3) Sometimes, form (function) dictates some compositional constraints. A house cannot be made of paper mâché, and a saw cannot be made of butter.

Suppose that the work of a saw is defined as a certain sort of division: that will not be, unless the saw has teeth of a certain sort, and there will not be teeth like that, if it is not made of iron [or some other suitably hard material]. For even in the account there are parts which stand to it as matter [200b5-7; cf. 200a10-13].

## FOUR CAUSES AND NATURAL TELEOLOGY

Aristotle thinks that there are four types of answer to basic explanatory questions such as "What is the cause of x?," "Why is x like this?," or "Why did x happen?." For some x (e.g. a house), we can identify its

1. **Material Cause:** the stuff or materials out of which it is made (e.g. nails, planks, bricks, glass).
2. **Efficient Cause:** the source or agent of change (e.g. the construction crew).
3. **Formal Cause:** the organized, functional state of x (e.g. the state when the materials have been put together according to plan and so constitute a house).

4. **Final Cause:** the goal or purpose for which the thing exists as it does (e.g. shelter).

These claims about the relation between form and matter and the primacy of form are fairly easy to understand and agree with as applied to artifacts whose functions are often easily ascertained by examining the intentions of the designer of the artifact. But Aristotle's primary concern is with natural organisms (e.g. human beings, other animals, and plants), not with artifacts. We may wonder whether Aristotle's explanatory claims can be extended unproblematically from artifacts -- where talk of function and purpose is clearly appropriate, because artifacts are the product of design -- to nature -- where appeal to a designer is less welcome, and talk of function or purpose may, therefore, seem more problematic. Aristotle does not want to appeal to an intelligent designer of nature. So why aren't all natural phenomena like the rain (198b16-35), admitting only of material-efficient causal explanation? Aristotle embraces formal-final explanation in nature (198b25-6, 199a22-6).

- Sharp teeth are for tearing meat, and flat teeth are for grinding meat.
- Spiders weave webs to trap food.
- Ants perform the roles they do to gain the benefits of a complex division of labor.
- Plants have leaves to protect their fruit.

If natural teleology is not to require a designer or backwards causation, Aristotle must claim that something's beneficial effects must be explanatorily related to what produces them (199a19-20). He can do this with natural processes and parts of natural organisms if he can appeal to something like random mutation and natural selection (198b29-32).

Whenever all the parts came about coincidentally, as though they were for something, these animals survived, since their constitution, though coming about by chance, made them suitable for <survival>. Other animals, however, were differently constituted and so were destroyed ... as Empodocles says of the man-headed calves [198b26-32].

Though the beneficial character of F does not explain why the first Fx is F (its being F was a matter of chance), nonetheless the beneficial nature of F explains why subsequent xs are F.

This defense of natural teleology works reasonably well for natural processes and parts of organisms. Does it work for organisms themselves? Aristotle wants to claim that the function of an organism (e.g. a person or a horse) is the set or range of activities whose benefits explain why organisms of that type exist and behave as they do. Aristotle develops this idea in De Anima.

## **THE HUMAN FUNCTION AND THE HUMAN SOUL**

Aristotle criticizes the Presocratics for offering material-efficient accounts of the soul (DA i 2). Though Plato comes closer to thinking of soul as form, he treats the soul as a mysterious substance, separable from the body (ii 1). The correct view identifies soul with function (412b10-413a2). He explains this idea beginning with places where his talk of form and function is clearest.

- If an axe were a natural body, then chopping would be its soul (412b12-5).
- If an eye were a natural body (rather than a part of one), then seeing would be its soul (412b17-21).

Only things that are living -- natural organisms -- have souls, and their souls are their functions (cf. 415a29-30, 415b15). So one thing that's necessary in the study of the soul is to identify different natural functions; this will allow us to identify different sorts of souls (ii 2-4). Aristotle identifies three main functions:

- a) Self-movement (413a20-35), including growth, reproduction, and nutrition
- b) Sensation (413b1-25), including perception, imagination (?), pleasure and pain, desire, and action
- c) Reflection (413b25-34), including practical and theoretical reasoning (which depend upon imagination).

Notice that in claiming that plants have souls, Aristotle is not assuming that plants are conscious, but only that they are organisms that fit within his formal-final system of explanation as goal-directed systems.

Aristotle wants to claim that the later functions typically involve or presuppose the earlier one(s) (414a30-b15), and that different sorts of souls correspond to these three functions.

- Plants are beings that exercise only (a)-type functions.
- Animals are beings that exercise both (a)-type and (b)-type functions.
- Humans are beings that exercise (a)-(c)-type functions.
- Gods are beings that exercise only (c)-type functions.

But we should not think of higher-order functions as mere conjunctions of lower-order functions. Additional capacities structure the way the organism that has them exercises the original ones. So animals are self-movers whose movement reflects the interaction of informational states (e.g. beliefs) about itself and its relation to its environment and motivational states (e.g. desires). And humans are self-movers whose movement reflects reasoning about its beliefs and desires.

The distinction between rational and non-rational animals is complicated by the fact that Aristotle associates imagination with both sorts of souls, but gives it a greater role in the souls of rational animals. This is not too hard to understand. Imagination involves the representation of possible states of affairs that are not part of one's current visual experience. The dog uses imagination when it digs for a bone it hid earlier. But rational animals use it much more systematically when they reason about which hypothesis to accept or what course of action to adopt.

## **EUDAIMONIA**

The final good can be a complex whole whose parts we desire both for their own sakes and for their role in a good life (1097a31-b6). Aristotle thinks that everyone agrees that eudaimonia is the final good; they disagree in their conceptions of eudaimonia (1095a17-21, 1097b22-3). He briefly examines three common conceptions of eudaimonia:

- Pleasure
- Honor
- Virtue

Though each candidate is part of a plausible conception, none is adequate by itself (1095b16-1096a4).

- a) The life of (pure) pleasure is fit for grazing animals, not for humans.
- b) The life of honor is too passive and is too much outside agent's control
- c) The life of virtue is close, but is not complete because it may lack of various goods that are not within our control, viz. external goods (e-goods)

These criticisms reflect three assumptions about eudaimonia:

1. The final good must be complete.
2. The final good must be an appropriate life for human beings.
3. The final good should be relatively stable and within our control.

### **FORMAL CRITERIA**

Aristotle links completeness with related formal criteria (1097a27-b22). A complete good is:

- Self-sufficient
- Most choiceworthy
- Lacking in nothing

### **THE HUMAN FUNCTION**

An account of x's good must reflect what x's function is or what x essentially is. The peculiar function of humans is not the single activity that they and they alone perform, but the organized cluster of activities that they and they alone perform (cf. the peculiar function of a swiss army knife).

Does it follow from x's performing its function well that this is good for x? The function of the king's food taster may be to thwart attempts to poison the king, but performing this function well may not be good for the food taster. x's performing her function F well may benefit her qua F, but may not benefit her as a person or human being. Will this gap between the good F and the good of that which is F arise when we are talking about the good person?

### **EXTERNAL GOODS**

Some goods (e.g. health, wealth, worldly success, good luck for oneself and one's special relations) are externals, because they are not fully within our control. Though e-goods are not fully within our control, completeness requires them.

However, many events are matters of fortune, and some are smaller, some greater. Hence, while small strokes of good or ill fortune clearly will not influence his life, many great strokes of good fortune will make it more blessed, since in themselves they naturally add adornment to it, and his use of them proves to be fine and excellent. Conversely, if they are great misfortunes, they oppress and spoil his blessedness, since they involve pain and impede many activities [1100b23-30].

Externals are essential both as necessary conditions of exercising some virtues (e.g. magnificence) (1099a31-3) and as parts of happiness (1099b1-7, 1100a6-8, 1100b27). Only a philosopher concerned to defend his theory in the face of common sense would deny the value of externals (1096a1-3).

That is why the happy person needs to have goods of the body and external goods added, and needs fortune also, so that he will not be impeded in these ways. Some maintain, on the contrary, that we are happy when we are broken on the rack, or fall into terrible misfortunes, provided that we are good [virtuous]. Whether they mean to or not, these people are talking nonsense [vii 13 1153b17-21].

Aristotle seems to have Socrates in mind here.

### **THE DOMINANCE OF VIRTUE**

Severe misfortunes may rob a virtuous person of happiness, but (a) they cannot make a virtuous person miserable, and (b) a person is always better off choosing virtue over any amount of e-goods (1098b15-16, 1099b17-27, 1100b1-11, 1100b31-34). Here, Aristotle embraces Plato's Comparative or Dominance Thesis, not Socrates's Sufficiency Thesis, about the role of virtue in happiness.

Suitability (2) and control (3) support the dominance of virtue. We can see a tension, though not inconsistency, between control (3) and completeness (1).

### **COMPREHENSIVE AND INTELLECTUALIST CONCEPTIONS OF HAPPINESS**

NE i appears to endorse a comprehensive conception in the sense that it includes e-goods as well as virtue and both intellectual virtues and virtues of character (1103a5 6). Most of the rest of the NE is devoted to a study of the virtues of character, either to the nature and conditions of such virtues in general (e.g. NE ii iii, vii) or of specific such virtues -- assorted virtues in iii and iv (e.g. bravery and temperance in iii; generosity, magnificence, and magnanimity in iv), justice in v, and friendship in viii-ix. This apparently overwhelming commitment to a comprehensive conception of eudaimonia explains why many commentators wish that Aristotle had never written NE x 7-8. There, he appears to endorse strict intellectualism, viz. the claim that theoretical reason or contemplation is not only the most, but indeed the exclusive good.

Hence the activity of the gods that is superior in blessedness will be an activity of study. And so the human activity that is most akin to the god's will, more than any others, have the character of happiness. A sign of this is the fact that other animals have no share in happiness, being completely deprived of this activity of study. For the whole life of the gods is blessed to the extent that it has something resembling this sort of activity; but none

of the other animals is happy, because none of them shares in study at all. Hence happiness extends just as far as study extends, and the more someone studies, the happier he is, not coincidentally but insofar as he studies, since study is valuable in itself. And so happiness will be some kind of study [1178b22-31].

Why is Aristotle attracted to strict intellectualism? At one point, he appeals to the divinity of contemplation (1177a13-18, 1177b27-1178a10, 1178b8-31).

1. Happiness should be identified with the best or most divine elements.
2. Contemplation is most godlike, because it is the activity characteristic of gods.
3. Hence, our happiness should be identified with contemplation.

But this appeal seems to run afoul of the function argument. After all, we are humans or rational animals, not gods. Indeed, we are essentially rational animals; were we to be transformed into gods, this would be a substantial change. But that means it wouldn't be good for us to undergo such a transformation, even if gods have better lives than rational animals.

Hence there is this puzzle: do friends really wish their friend to have the greatest good, e.g. to be a god? For [if he becomes a god], he will no longer have friends, and hence no longer have goods, since friends are good. If, then, we have been right to say that one friend wishes good things to the other for the sake of the other himself, the other must remain whatever sort of being he is. Hence it is to the other as a human being that a friend will wish the greatest goods ... [1159a6-12].

Aristotle also appeals to our control over contemplation (1177a27-35, 1178a24-8).

1. The life of contemplation is most within our control .
2. Happiness must be within our control.
3. Hence, happiness must consist in contemplation alone.

Aristotle claims here that contemplation is a more "self-sufficient" good. Here, self-sufficiency is being understood in terms of control, rather than, as in book i, in terms of completeness. But complete control is inconsistent with the completeness requirement, as well as the function argument.

We can reconcile intellectualist and comprehensive claims if the former assert only comparative or conditional theses.

1. Contemplation is the single activity that best fits the criteria for happiness.
2. If happiness must be some single activity, contemplation is the best candidate.
3. If happiness includes more than one activity, contemplation will be the most important.
4. Happiness consists in contemplation alone.

Some endorsements of contemplation can be understood in comparative or conditional terms. However, other endorsements of contemplation seem to defy such analysis (e.g. 1178b25-29).

Hence the activity of the gods that is superior in blessedness will be an activity of study. And so the human activity that is most akin to the god's will, more than any others, have the character of happiness. *A sign of this is the fact that other animals have no share in happiness, being completely deprived of this activity of study. For the whole life of the gods is blessed to the extent that it has something resembling this sort of activity; but none of the other animals is happy, because none of them shares in study at all. Hence happiness extends just as far as study extends, and the more someone studies, the happier he is, not coincidentally but insofar as he studies, since study is valuable in itself. And so happiness will be some kind of study* [1178b22-31, italics added].

## **VIRTUE**

The virtues of character concern both the part of the soul that has reason and the part that obeys reason (1098a3-5, 1102b13-1103a3); virtue is the condition in which the nonrational part of the soul that can obey reason does so and harmonizes with rational choice (1102b25-8). There are four possible relations between these two parts of the soul that are important to Aristotle's moral psychology (1102b14-28).

1. **Virtue**: the rational and nonrational parts agree in pursuing the right ends.
2. **Continnence**: the rational and nonrational parts disagree; the rational part chooses the right ends; the nonrational part chooses the wrong ends; and the rational part wins.
3. **Incontinence**: the rational and nonrational parts disagree; the rational part chooses the right ends; the nonrational part chooses the wrong ends; and the nonrational part overcomes the rational part.
4. **Vice**: the rational and nonrational parts of the soul agree in pursuing the wrong ends.

This taxonomy avoids the familiar, but oversimple, two-fold classification of characters into virtuous or vicious. Note different patterns within this taxonomy.

- Virtue and vice both involve agreement between the rational and nonrational parts of the soul, whereas continence and incontinence both involve conflicts between these two parts.
- In the case of virtue and continence, the agent acts as he should, whereas in the case of incontinence and vice he does not.
- In the case of virtue, continence, and incontinence the agent makes the right judgment, whether or not he acts on it, whereas only the vicious person forms the wrong judgment.

## **THE DOCTRINE OF THE MEAN**

Virtue is a mean between excess and deficiency of action or feeling (ii 6). The doctrine of the mean is not a decision procedure; the right decision determines the mean, not the other way around (1106b36-1107b4, 1109a24-5). There is no mean with respect to base actions, such as adultery or murder, or base feelings, such as envy or childishness (1107a9-25; MM 1186a36-b3); where there is a mean it is not always the mid-point (cf. 1106a33 b6).

So what is the significance of the doctrine of the mean? In contrast with a Socratic account, it underscores the role of affective states in virtue. For example, magnanimity requires the proper mix of concern for self and the opinion of others; it requires not only curbing self-

aggrandizement but also a healthy concern for oneself and pride in one's accomplishments. Virtue requires proper habituation and training of the nonrational parts of the soul. It also contrasts with a Kantian account of virtue or the good will.

[T]here are many persons who are so sympathetically constituted, that without any further motive of vanity or self interest, they find an inner joy around them and can rejoice in the satisfaction of others as their own work. But I maintain that in such a case an action of this kind, however dutiful and amiable it might be, has nevertheless no true moral worth. ... [It] accords with duty and is thus honorable, deserves praise and encouragement, but not esteem .... Further still, if nature has put little sympathy in this or that man's heart, if (while being an honest man in other respects) he is by temperament cold and indifferent to the sufferings of others ... if such a man (who would truly not be nature's worst product) had not been exactly fashioned by her a philanthropist, would he not yet find in himself a source from which he might give himself a worth far higher than any that a good natured temperament might have? By all means, because just here does the worth of the character come out; this worth is moral and incomparably the highest of all, viz. that he is beneficent, not from inclination, but from duty [Groundwork 398-9].

Whereas Kant's grudging moralist may display a good will, he would appear to display Aristotelian continence, rather than virtue.

### **AKRASIA?**

On the one hand, Aristotle thinks that the Socratic denial of akrasia is hard to believe (1145b23-9) and seems to endorse the Platonic view that the incontinent person is overcome by appetites and pleasure (1147b23-34, 1149b26). On the other hand, Aristotle does concede the Socratic claim that the (putative) akrates lacks a kind of knowledge (1147b14-20).

Though (apparent) akrasia involves being overcome by appetite, it also involves a kind of ignorance; the ignorance of the incontinent is due to appetite. The incontinent has knowledge potentially (*dunamis*), but not actually (*no energia*). At the time of acting the incontinent is ignorant of the minor premise of the practical syllogism.

1. I ought not to do F-things.
2. This thing (x) is F.
3. Hence, I ought not to do x.

When all the beliefs are active, (3) produces the appropriate action (or omission). In the incontinent person, (1)-(3) do not produce the appropriate action, even though her beliefs are, at some point, all active (1147a34). When the incontinent person is affected by her appetites, Aristotle thinks that she no longer believes (2) actively (1147b9-12). At the time of acting, pleasure causes her knowledge of (2) to be merely potential.

But why is ignorance always of the minor premise? Don't I sometimes, through the influence of appetite or pleasure, make an exception to the generalization contained in the major premise? Also, is ignorance doing any real work in the explanation of (apparent) akrasia? Isn't it to say that the akrates didn't have the right sort of knowledge consequential on her not acting on that knowledge? But, if so, lack of knowledge doesn't seem to explain akrasia.

Perhaps we can answer both worries by attending to Aristotle's suggestion that the incontinent person forms the wrong perceptual belief only coincidentally (1147b2). What he may have in mind is that appetite focuses the akrate's attention on some other desirable feature (G) of x -- for instance, its pleasurableness -- blocking or occluding her recognition of x as F (where F-things are to be avoided). In this way, poorly trained appetites can result in knowledge that the things is to be avoided residing in the background, rather than the foreground. On this reading, Aristotle's treatment of akrasia bears comparison with Socratic claims about temporal bias in Plato's Protagoras.