

# Aristotle and the Good Life: Readings and Assignments (Part I)

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## Guidelines

- You must do **five** of the short assignments listed below over the course of the semester. If you choose to do more, I will take the best five of the assignments that you do. The assignments are due in two drafts, the first of which is due the day we cover the topic and the second of which is due on May 4th. We should work through the topics at a rate of roughly a section a class, but we'll see. Always check the class website (<http://www.chrisyoung.net/teaching>) for updates, supplemental information, tips on the reading, and responses to other students' comments.
- There is a strict limit on the length of the Short Assignments. They should *never* exceed 2 pages (12 point font, double spaced, with regular margins).
- Please bring (at least) 10 copies of your assignment when you come to class. Be prepared to read your paper aloud, since most days the short assignments will form the basis for class discussion.
- Assignments are due at the beginning of class. After that point, the assignment can no longer be turned in.
- You are free to choose the topics which interest you most, but you must do two assignments by the end of February and one assignment by the end of March.
- You should read and make use of both translations of the *Nicomachean Ethics* when you write your short assignments, but the assignment questions below use the Brodie/Rowe translation rather than the Irwin translation.
- You should always cite references to specific texts by the Bekker number. Bekker numbers are the numbers in the margin of the text (e.g., 1109a16).
- Remember, these are *short* assignments. You are not expected to cover a subject exhaustively. You should focus carefully on the question you have been asked to answer; a good deal of the thinking involved in the assignment comes in figuring out what you *don't* really need to say.
- The Short Assignments should be literate and carefully proof-read before you get to class. The Short Assignments in this class are not like rough diary entries in which you free associate about a topic.
- Avoid quotation for the most part when you're explicating Aristotle. I want to see you try to express the ideas in your own words. In general, when students rely on quotations to explain an author's position, instructors marking their papers assume that they don't understand the author's position.

- Please don't bother with cover pages for your Short Assignments.
- Your grade for the Short Assignment will be based on consideration of both the original and the re-write. Please hand in the original with your re-write.

## **Part I: Introductory Material**

### **1.1. An introduction to Aristotle's life and work. The main themes of the course.**

*Monday, January 24th*

READING: None.

ASSIGNMENT: None.

### **1.2. The Good Life**

*Wednesday, January 26th*

READING: None, but you might try to get a head start on the reading for next week.

ASSIGNMENT: Answer **one** of the following questions:

a) Briefly sketch the best life for a human being that you can imagine. What elements does it contain? What is it about that life that makes it good? Of course, you may be able to think of a number of fundamentally different lives, all of which seem good, and none of which seems obviously superior to the others. But take a closer look. For all their differences, do they share any common features (perhaps they are all filled with enjoyment? or a particular kind of fulfillment? or success?)? If so, what are those common features?

b) It seems to many philosophers that our lives can go better or worse, depending on our circumstances, characters, and actions. But it also seems to some skeptics that there is simply no objective answer to the question of what makes a good life good. If you're attracted to this brand of skepticism, explain why. After all, there do seem to be objective answers about what is healthy for a human body (e.g., exercise, a good diet) - so why should it surprise us if it turns out that there are objective answers about what makes a human life go well or badly?

## **Part II: Happiness**

### **2.1. The Structure of Human Action**

*Monday, January 31st*

READING: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I and Book X.6-9  
*Eudemian Ethics*, Book I, Book II.1-2, Book VIII.1-2.

ASSIGNMENT: A Twentieth Century philosopher once wrote, "Ancient and medieval philosophers - or some of them at any rate - regarded it as evident, demonstrable, that human beings must always act with some end in view, and even with some one end in view. The arguments for this strike us as strange. Can't a man just do what he does, a great deal of the time? He may or may not have a reason or a purpose; and if he has a reason or purpose, it in turn may just be what he happens to want . . . . The old arguments were designed to show that the chain [of ends] could not go on forever; they [i.e., the arguments] pass us by, because we are not inclined to think it [i.e., the chain of ends] *must* even begin; and it can surely stop where it stops, no need for it to stop at a purpose that looks intrinsically final, one and the same for all actions. In fact there appears to be an illicit transition in Aristotle, from 'all chains must stop somewhere' to 'there is somewhere where all chains must stop'."

Very briefly describe the remarks that make Aristotle a target here (throughout the passage, not just at the end). Is there anything to the criticism in the passage just quoted? How might Aristotle respond to it, if he can respond? How might he modify his position, if he can't?

## 2.2. The Function Argument

Wednesday, February 2nd

READING: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I and Book X.6-9  
*Eudemian Ethics*, Book I, Book II.1-2, Book VIII.1-2.

ASSIGNMENT: In *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7, Aristotle appeals to the function of human beings in order to reach more precise conclusions about the human good. His argument has long perplexed commentators, and will probably perplex you, if you stop to think about it. Briefly describe the "function argument" in I.7 and briefly explain why you find it unconvincing.

## 2.3. Solon's Advice

Monday, February 7th

READING: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I and Book X.6-9  
*Eudemian Ethics*, Book I, Book II.1-2, Book VIII.1-2.

ASSIGNMENT: Solon once said that you should count no man happy until he is dead. (I will post Solon's story on the class website.) Aristotle discusses this claim in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I.10-11. Although Aristotle rejects Solon's claim, he is clearly tempted by it. Why? What considerations pull Aristotle in either direction? What do these considerations tell us about Aristotle's conception of happiness?

## 2.4. Intellectualist versus Inclusivist interpretations of happiness

Wednesday, February 9th

READING: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I and Book X.6-9  
*Eudemian Ethics*, Book I, Book II.1-2, Book VIII.1-2.

ASSIGNMENT: In Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that happiness is activity of soul in accordance with excellence over a complete life. His discussion of this point in Book I seems to include both excellences of character and intellectual excellences. But when we get to Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle seems to come down decidedly on the side of intellectual excellence. This move has left many commentators unsatisfied. If contemplation is the highest good - higher than the exercise of virtue - than should the philosophically capable among us pursue contemplation even at the expense of being good people? How do Aristotle's claims about exercising the god-like element in us in Book X fit with the function argument in Book I (which seems to make our *humanity* central to Aristotle's argument)? How is Book X's emphasis on contemplation supposed to fit with the fact that almost all of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is taken up with the excellences of character and the advantages of friendship? If contemplation is to be pursued at the expense of the excellences of character, then why did Aristotle bother discussing the former at such length? And how philosophically satisfying is Aristotle's ideal anyway? Is it too narrow or blinkered? Pick **one** problem in the neighborhood of these issues and discuss it.

## 2.5. The Methods and Ambitions of Ethics

Monday, February 14th

READING: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I and Book X.6-9  
*Eudemian Ethics*, Book I, Book II.1-2, Book VIII.1-2.

ASSIGNMENT: Let's contrast two different readings of Aristotle's ambitions in his ethical writings, a rationalist and a non-rationalist interpretation of Aristotle. In the words of one scholar, the rationalist interpretation

represents Aristotle's ethical works as seeking to defend the rationality of virtue by means of arguments capable of persuading any *rational* interlocutor, whether or not she has any prior commitment to Aristotelian virtue, that she *ought* to pursue such virtue.

The same scholar describes the non-rationalist interpretation as follows: it

represents Aristotle as 'modestly' rejecting the possibility of giving any such arguments and so foregoing any attempt to persuade radical critics — or even moral skeptics — that *they* ought to pursue Aristotelian virtue. That is why . . . Aristotle requires those who would attend his lectures on ethics to come already equipped with a proper upbringing (EN 1095a2-11; b4-8), which consists at least partly in being habituated not simply to *recognize* what is fine and what is base, but also to *love* what is fine and to *hate* what is base (EN 1179b24-1180a18). . . . [On this interpretation] Aristotle takes ethical argument to be ineffective in the

absence of some such motivational tendencies, which he thinks required in order for the student even to *understand* — and so to be moved by — the sort of reasoning offered in his ethical works.

There seems to be evidence in favor of both the rationalist and the non-rationalist interpretations scattered throughout Aristotle's ethical writings, much of which you have yet to encounter. But you have already come across some of the relevant texts, and you can revise and rethink your second draft of this paper later in the semester taking the rest of the ethical writings into account. Very briefly, which interpretation of Aristotle seems most plausible to you? What exactly does Aristotle seem to be trying to accomplish in his ethical writings? (If you think both interpretations share a common flaw, or have some other way of going at the issue, you can argue for that. I don't want to suggest that these are the only two ways to read Aristotle.)

### **Part III: Virtue**

#### **3.1. Virtue: The account**

READING: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II

ASSIGNMENT: What is an excellence of character (a "virtue", in the other translations), according to Aristotle?

#### **3.2. Courage**

READING: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III

ASSIGNMENT: Answer one of the following questions:

a) Assess Aristotle's account of courage. To do this, explain what it is, what its strengths are, and what aspects of courage Aristotle might have overlooked.

b) Aristotle's function argument seems to commit him to the view that the excellences of character are good *for* a person (and not just things that make a person good). But Aristotle also thinks that courage - a virtue that gets people killed, after all - is an excellence of character. Does Aristotle want to have his philosophical cake and eat it too? Or is there some way to reconcile these two claims?

#### **3.3. The Great-Souled Person**

READING: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IV

ASSIGNMENT: In Book IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes the great-souled person. We may be attracted to some aspects of Aristotle's description, but others will surely leave us cold. Describe and assess Aristotle's depiction of the great-souled person.

### **3.4. From Virtue to the Virtues**

READING: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, III, IV

ASSIGNMENT: As Aristotle moves from his general account of virtue to his accounts of the particular virtues, we may wonder how much of what he says about the particular virtues is required, or justified by, his more general account - or, indeed, anything else that he says. In other words, even if we accept his general account, we might be tempted to ask, "Why *these* particular virtues? Why not some other virtues? Or why not the same virtues, but differently characterized?" On the one hand, these seem to be perfectly sensible questions. On the other, if just anything goes when we're supplying a list of alternative virtues within Aristotle's general framework, then why couldn't we say, for example, that cruelty or sadism are virtues? But if Aristotle's general reflections about virtue would be compatible with this, then the general reflections will appear vacuous and his particular claims about the virtues will appear arbitrary. We can probably make progress on this question by asking: What constraints are there on what can count as a virtue for Aristotle? How reasonable are these constraints? And how exactly does Aristotle get from his general account of virtue to his particular claims about the virtues? Briefly discuss any of these three questions.

### **3.5. The Virtue of Justice**

READING: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book V

ASSIGNMENT: How does the virtue of justice differ from the other virtues? Notice that Aristotle distinguishes between two different kinds of justice, so the answer will differ for each.

### **3.6. The Intellectual Virtues: The Account**

READING: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI

ASSIGNMENT: What is wisdom, according to Aristotle? What are its basic characteristics and how is it distinguished from other intellectual achievements?

### **3.7. The Intellectual Virtues: The Adequacy of the Account**

READING: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI

ASSIGNMENT: Very briefly describe Aristotle's account of wisdom, and then assess it.

## **Part IV: Action and Decision**

### **4.1. Responsibility and blame**

READING: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III

ASSIGNMENT: When does someone act voluntarily, according to Aristotle?

### **4.2. Self-Control**

READING: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VII.1-10

ASSIGNMENT: In Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes: "But someone might raise the problem: in what sense does a person have a correct grasp when he behaves uncontrolledly?" Explain the problem, and briefly describe Aristotle's solution to it.

. . . to be continued.