

Teaching note for
Philosophical Ethics or Moral Philosophy Class
Discussing Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

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For many generations, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* has been considered the classic text used to introduce students to virtue ethics. Many translations of the text are available, and the scholarly literature devoted to commenting on Aristotle's ethics is vast. Rather than aiming to introduce students to the interpretive debates of professional philosophers, we suggest focusing on the issues of deep concern that Aristotle raises for his readers. The first two books of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are particularly fruitful for promoting reasoned discourse about the good life and the character traits that are integral to living well.

In Book One, Aristotle draws a distinction between two kinds of purposes: some are outcomes; others are activities. He then reasons that human flourishing, that is, the good life for humans, is an activity, not an outcome. Next, he evaluates various forms of life to examine whether such activities are conducive to human flourishing. In particular, he considers the pursuit of pleasure, consumption, money, or prestige, and he gives reasons why each such life is not ultimately suitable to human flourishing. These arguments can be used as models for students to show that it is possible to reason together in a community to consider what makes for a good human life. Aristotle concludes Book One with the insight that the best life for humans consists in cultivating and exercising a set of excellent traits.

In Book Two, Aristotle examines these traits. He begins by distinguishing between intellectual excellence (which is acquired through study and experience) and moral excellence (which is acquired through habit and repeatedly making good choices). Both are integral to a good human life. He famously defines virtue as a state of character shaped by deliberate choices that aim at the mean between two extremes (avoiding excess and deficiency) relative to each individual's context guided by practical reason and exemplified by the person of practical wisdom. As examples of such virtuous character traits, Aristotle focuses on courage, temperance, generosity, proper pride, gentleness, truthfulness, wittiness, friendliness, and modesty. These character traits, when practiced in a community in relation to others, constitute the virtue of justice (as Aristotle explains in Book Five) and they need to be directed by the virtue of practical wisdom, including the ability to take in appropriate information, deliberate, make good judgments, and execute such decisions (as Aristotle explains in Book Six).

Many students initially will find it a challenge to read Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. However, when assigned to read the text along with study questions such as those listed below, students frequently find the ensuing conversations invigorating. One key to teaching the texts of Aristotle is to show that young people are always already concerned with questions about both how to live well and about which traits are conducive to a good life.

Study Questions on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II

1. What are the two kinds of virtue (excellence)? (1103a15)
2. According to Aristotle, how does one acquire intellectual virtue? (1103a15-16)
3. According to Aristotle, how does one acquire moral virtue? How does one's state of character get shaped and formed? (1103a17)
4. What does Aristotle mean when he states that virtue is something we "learn by doing"? (1103a33) How is becoming an excellent person similar to becoming an excellent musician? (1103b1)
5. At the beginning of chapter 2, Aristotle states his purpose in writing about virtue. (1103b27) Is he hoping his readers (and students) acquire theoretical understanding, or is his hope to help form the activity of soul of his readers and students so they can live good lives?
6. What two things destroy virtue? (1104a12) How is this shown in the example of excellent strength or health?
7. At the beginning of chapter 3, what does Aristotle mean when he says that the pleasures or pains that follow an act are signs of an individual's character? (1104b5) How does one's character alter whether an action is pleasant or painful?
8. In chapter 4, Aristotle considers a puzzle. It's a puzzle about actions and the person doing the action. Explain the puzzle and Aristotle's solution.
9. In chapter 5, Aristotle makes a first pass on considering what virtue is. (He tries to determine its general category.) Is it a passion, a faculty, or a state of character? What does he mean by each of these? In particular, what is a "state of character"?

10. In chapter 6, Aristotle refines the definition of virtue. (Having established that it is a state of character, what makes a virtue an excellent state of character? How is it related to human function?)
11. Still in chapter 6 (1106b26), Aristotle draws a distinction between the numerical mean and the mean relative to an individual person. Explain the distinction with regard to how much food is healthy.
12. Near the end of chapter 6, Aristotle provides a careful (six part) definition of moral virtue. What is his definition? (1107a1)
13. At the end of chapter 6, Aristotle points out that some actions (adultery, theft, murder) are bad in themselves (1107a11). How does virtue differ from simply avoiding such actions?
14. In chapter 7, Aristotle refers to a table that lists nine moral virtues. What virtues and vices are included on this list? Is it possible to reconstruct this table? How is each virtue a "mean" between two extremes?
15. Several of the virtues that Aristotle lists have to do with proper desires and feelings. In particular, he mentions feelings of fear and confidence; desires related to taste and touch; the desire to give; and the feeling of anger. He suggests that through habit, we can change what we desire. Is this true? Can we educate our desires and feelings? Isn't education just aimed at the intellect and theoretical understanding?
16. Aristotle begins chapter 9 by summarizing his teaching on the virtues. What conclusion does he draw about the ease of acquiring excellent moral habits? (1109a26)
17. Aristotle gives several pieces of practical advice on how to achieve the mean. What should be avoided? (1109b5) What should we guard against? (1109b8)