

Bentley College
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PH 101: Problems of Philosophy
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NOTES ON ARISTOTLE

I. PASSAGES OF PARTICULAR RELEVANCE TO THE PAPER ASSIGNMENT

The purpose of this section is to suggest passages that you may find relevant for explaining what Aristotle's position is on whether or how human moral virtue is acquired. I am not directing you to discuss all of these passages in your paper, and I am certainly not offering the summaries that follow as sources to cite in your paper. As always, you should base your interpretation of the philosopher's position on what he says, not on what others (myself included) say about him. However, the passages summarized here are the ones that you are most likely to find useful in answering the assigned question.

Book I, chapter 13, ¶¶ 20–22: The soul contains a rational principle and also an element that is in itself irrational but that shares in the rational principle, in the sense that it is capable of obeying the rational principle (though also of resisting and opposing it). The latter element is the appetitive and desiring element of the soul. The virtue of the rational principle in the soul is intellectual virtue; the virtue of the appetitive and desiring element that shares in the rational principle is moral virtue.

Book II, chapter 1, ¶¶ 1–4: Moral virtues do not arise in us by nature or contrary to nature; rather, we are adapted by nature to acquire them through habituation. Arguments: (i) nothing that exists by nature can be habituated to act contrary to its nature (example of the stone); (ii) if virtues existed in us by nature, we would possess them before we exercised them (contrast with vision); (iii) legislators make citizens good by forming good habits in them; (iv) virtues are produced or destroyed by habitual actions.

Book II, chapter 2, ¶¶ 6–7: Virtues are destroyed by defect and excess in actions and emotions. Habitually acting and feeling in ways that correspond to the virtues produces the virtues in us.

Book II, chapter 4, ¶¶ 9–12: How is it possible to act in accordance with a virtue before one actually possesses the virtue? An action in accordance with a virtue is not necessarily done in the way that someone who possesses the virtue does it: to be that, it must meet three conditions (listed).

Book II, chapter 6, ¶¶ 19–23: A virtue is a state of character concerned with choice and lying in a mean relative to us—feeling certain emotions or taking certain actions at the right times, with reference to the right objects, toward the right people, with the right motives, and in the right way.

II. THE ARGUMENT THAT HAPPINESS IS THE CHIEF GOOD

Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* contains two arguments that are particularly important for the overall argument of the work as well as particularly difficult to make out. In this section and the next, I provide analyses of those arguments.

In chapter 7, ¶¶ 8–9, Aristotle distinguishes among three classes of ends, which may be presented in a table as follows (parts enclosed in square brackets are my additions):

CLASS 1	CLASS 2	CLASS 3
Ends desirable only for the sake of other things: not final	Ends desirable for their own sake and also for the sake of other things: [final with qualification]	Ends desirable for their own sake alone: final without qualification
<i>Example:</i> wealth	[<i>Example:</i> scientific knowledge] ¹	<i>Example:</i> happiness

The argument of these paragraphs may be summarized (in standard form; again, with my additions enclosed in square brackets) as follows:

1. An end that is desirable for its own sake [class 2 or 3] is more final than an end that is desirable only for the sake of another end [class 1].
2. An end that is desirable for its own sake alone and never for the sake of another end [class 3] is more final than an end that is desirable both for its own sake and for the sake of another end [class 2].
3. Therefore, an end that is desirable for its own sake alone and never for the sake of another end [class 3] is the most final kind of end—one that is final without qualification. (From 1 and 2)
4. Happiness is chosen always for itself and never for the sake of anything else.
5. [Therefore, happiness is final without qualification. (From 3 and 4)]
6. The chief good is final without qualification.
7. [Therefore, happiness is the chief good. (From 5 and 6)]

Unfortunately, this argument contains two *non sequiturs*. First, step 5 does not follow from 3 and 4, because 3 concerns things that are *desirable* for their own sake alone, while 4 says of happiness that it is *chosen* for its own sake alone. This fault, however, can be remedied by adding a premise to the effect that anything that is *chosen* for its own sake

¹Aristotle does not give an example of an end of class 2; and properly speaking, happiness is not an *example* of an end of class 3, because it is, according to Aristotle, the *only* end of that type.

alone is *desirable* for its own sake alone. The addition of this premise will, however, require the addition also of at least one further intermediate conclusion. Alternatively, we can avoid such complication by replacing the word “chosen” in step 4 with the word “desirable.” I adopt this method in the revised analysis below.

Second, from the fact that happiness is an end of a certain kind (step 5) and that the chief good is an end of that same kind (step 6), it simply does not follow that happiness is the chief good (step 7). The inference has the same form as the following argument (the fallaciousness of which will, I hope, be obvious): “The President is from Texas; my cousin is from Texas; therefore, my cousin is the President.” The flaw in the argument may be repaired by adding to the argument a premise to the effect that nothing other than happiness is desirable for its own sake alone. Incorporating these improvements, the argument would be rewritten as follows (alterations and additions indicated by italics):

1. An end that is desirable for its own sake is more final than an end that is desirable only for the sake of another end.
2. An end that is desirable for its own sake alone and never for the sake of another end is more final than an end that is desirable both for its own sake and for the sake of another end.
3. Therefore, an end that is desirable for its own sake alone and never for the sake of another end is the most final kind of end—one that is final without qualification. (From 1 and 2)
4. Happiness is *desirable* always for itself and never for the sake of anything else.
5. [Therefore, happiness is final without qualification. (From 3 and 4)]
6. [*Nothing other than happiness is desirable for itself and never for the sake of anything else.*]
7. [*Therefore, nothing other than happiness is final without qualification. (From 3 and 6)*]
8. The chief good is final without qualification.
9. [Therefore, happiness is the chief good. (From 5, 7, and 8)]

II. THE FUNCTION ARGUMENT

Paragraph 11 in chapter 7 of book I contains an argument known as *the function argument*. The argument is particularly important, but Aristotle’s presentation of it is highly elliptical: many steps are merely implied and not stated. In what follows, as before, I have inserted such steps in square brackets.

The argument may be divided into two parts. The first part is the argument for the thesis that the human function is, as Aristotle puts it, “an active life of the element that has a rational principle” or “an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle.” In what follows, I have replaced these phrases with the simpler phrase “rational activity.”

1. [There are three kinds of life found in human beings: the life of nutrition and growth, the life of perception, and rational activity.]
2. Plants and animals share with us the life of nutrition and growth.
3. Animals share with us the life of perception.
4. Therefore, neither the life of nutrition and growth nor the life of perception is distinctive of human beings. (From 2 and 3)
5. Therefore, the kind of life that is distinctive of human beings is rational activity. (From 1 and 4)
6. [The function of a living being of a particular kind is the kind of life that is distinctive of beings of that kind.]
7. Therefore, the function of a human being is rational activity. (From 5 and 6)

The second part of the argument is for the thesis that happiness is rational activity in accordance with the appropriate virtue. You will not find this thesis stated at the end of the passage containing the argument; rather, the passage concludes with the assertion that the human *good* is rational activity in accordance with virtue. However, it is clear from the context, and in particular from the first sentence of the paragraph containing the argument, that Aristotle means to establish the first-mentioned claim, and that he is relying on his having previously established that happiness *is* the human good. The second part therefore may be presented as follows:

8. The function of a good thing of a particular kind is just the function of a thing of that kind performed well.
9. [Therefore, the function of a good human being is rational activity performed well. (From 7 and 8)]
10. Any activity is performed well when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate virtue.
11. Therefore, the function of a good human being is rational activity in accordance with the appropriate virtue. (From 9 and 10)
12. [The good of a being of a particular kind is whatever makes a being of that kind a good one.]
13. Therefore, the human good is rational activity in accordance with the appropriate virtue. (From 11 and 12)
14. [The human good is happiness. (Argued in chapter 7)]
15. [Therefore, happiness is rational activity in accordance with the appropriate virtue. (From 13 and 14)]