

Questions on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics**

Book I

Ch. 1: In what sense (if any) is it true that "the good is that at which all things aim"? Is this an empirical claim about what, in fact, everything aims at? Or, is this a necessary truth -- something which, in principle, could not be refuted by evidence? Aristotle says "In cases where the end lies beyond the action the product is naturally superior to the activity" -- what does he have in mind?

Ch. 2: Aristotle argues that there must be something we desire for its own sake -- how does the argument go? "You cannot make men better by act of parliament" -- or so it has been said. What would Aristotle think of this claim? Is he right?

Ch. 3: 1094b - 25 is a famous passage.

Ch. 4: Notice the difference between proceeding from and leading up to fundamental principles and between "what is known to us" and "what is known' pure and simple". What is the point of the passage quoted from Hesiod?

Ch. 5: IMPORTANT--One translation: "It is not unreasonable that men should derive their concept of the good and of happiness from the lives which they lead." Another translation: "There is a general assumption that the manner of a man's life is a clue to what he on reflection regards as the good." How do these differ? Aristotle argues against the view that happiness lies in satisfying appetites, and he argues against thinking it lies in receiving honor or in being an excellent person or in having money. What are his arguments?

Ch. 6: 1095b - Aristotle is here taking a position directly opposed to Plato's. What are the opposing positions? Whose is better? Is there a third position available?

Here's a different translation of 1096a-20:

...a thing may be called good in three ways: in itself, in some quality it has, in some relation it bears to something else.

Ch. 7: Aristotle claims that the highest good is both final and self-sufficient. What does he mean by 'final' in this context? by 'self-sufficient'? What arguments does he offer for his position? The second paragraph of this chapter should remind you of Glaucon's distinction between three kinds of goods. Why does Aristotle introduce the notion of the proper function of man? How will it help Aristotle to pin down the nature of the highest good for man (and so the nature of happiness)? The arguments contained in this chapter are extremely important and very difficult. Spend some time trying to work them out.

Ch. 8: Notice how Aristotle turns to our common sense notions about happiness in order to defend his view.

Ch. 13: Aristotle claims the soul has two parts -- what are they and how do they relate to the three parts Socrates thought there were? What distinguishes the moral virtues from the intellectual virtues? Why do they both count as virtues?

Book II

Ch. 1: IMPORTANT CHAPTER -- What is the connection between habit and moral virtue, according to Aristotle? Aristotle argues that "the virtues are implanted in us neither by nature nor contrary to nature" -- how does his argument go? How can a person's virtue be destroyed? Why is it "no small matter whether one habit or another is inculcated in us from early childhood"?

Ch. 3: Aristotle identifies several different connections between virtue and pleasure (and pain) -- what are they?

Ch. 4: IMPORTANT CHAPTER -- What objection does Aristotle consider and does he succeed in meeting it? According to Aristotle "in the case of the virtues an act is not performed justly or with self-control if the act itself is of a certain kind, but only if in addition the agent has certain characteristics as he performs it." What characteristics must the agent have? What is the difference between a just act and an act done justly?

Ch. 5: Aristotle argues that virtue should not be identified with emotions, nor with capacities, but with characteristics. Notice that here he is relying upon an argument by elimination. Can you describe the way he argues against identifying virtue with either emotions or capacities? Can you do so in general terms that capture his over-all strategy?

Chs. 5 - 9: Try to map out (literally) the terrain of virtue. Is Aristotle right -- is virtue a mean between two extremes?

Book III

Ch. 1: Do people ever perform actions to which they contribute nothing? Don't they always contribute (at the very least) the body which performs the act? Try to make the notion of compulsory acts clear. What is the difference between actions performed in ignorance and actions performed due to ignorance?

Ch. 2: How are voluntary action, deliberation, and choice related, according to Aristotle?

Ch. 3: Be clear about the relation between deliberation, ends, and means.

Ch. 4: How are the two views reconciled?

Ch. 5: If we are to use 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' with reference to the time acts are performed (Ch. 1) and if one can lose the opportunity to be virtuous, then can't it be true that sometimes it is not in our power to be good?

Ch. 9: IMPORTANT QUESTION: Would Aristotle agree with the claim that even a brave man facing torture is seeking his own pleasure?

Chs. 6,7,8,10,11,12: There are no significant philosophical arguments in these chapters. However, the classifications Aristotle offers are both insightful and important. Don't give them short shrift.

* Gratefully adapted from materials from Geoff Sayre-McCord.