Virtue

1. Recap from last time. Set up for NE after Book I: Aristotle has argued that: to have the highest good for a human is to be happy or flourishing (ευδαιµων, literally ‘good-spirited’). To be happy is to be functioning in the best possible way for a thing of one’s kind. And to function in the best possible way is to function in accord with virtue.

2. It follows, then, that happiness is the ‘activity of the soul exhibiting virtue, and if there is more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete’ (1098a16-18).

3. This raises three questions, which make up a substantial part of the rest of NE, and which we’ll discuss today: What is virtue? How do we get it? And what is the precise relationship between having it and being happy?

What is Virtue?

1. What are some virtues, and when do you hear people talking about them?

2. Aristotle had a somewhat broader conception of what a virtue is than we have. Our word ‘virtue’ comes to us through the Latin word ‘virtus’, which means literally ‘manliness,’ but figuratively ‘courage.’ But this is a bad translation of Aristotle’s term. It’s overly specific and overly moral. Aristotle’s term, αρετη, is better translated ‘excellence,’ and had quite broad applications: you could talk about moral arete, but you could also talk about intellectual arete, or the arete of a knife, etc.

3. This makes it easier right off the bat to see the connection that Aristotle took to be fairly obvious between living virtuously and living well. For us, we reflexively think of the moral life as a life of sacrifice and not necessarily one of personal happiness. But for Aristotle the life of virtue simply was the life of excellence, the life of functioning as well as possible. Morality comes into it only insofar as the excellent person is morally good, but in a way that’s logically secondary to the excellent person’s being excellent.

4. So what does Ar. think the specific virtues are? The second through sixth books of the NE are largely about the individual virtues. Aristotle first divides the virtues into two classes, the virtues of character and the intellectual virtues. Aristotle enumerates the former in II.7: courage, moderation, open-handedness, munificence, greatness of soul, loving honor (in an intermediate way), mildness, truthfulness in social contexts; wittiness; friendliness. Later in the NE Aristotle will also discuss justice at length, as well as the virtues of intellect: having good practical and intellectual judgment.

5. Question: What do you think Aristotle has left out of this list? What surprises you about it?

6. So much for the individual virtues. Let’s turn to a more abstract, and very important, question: What sort of thing is a virtue? Aristotle considers three option: feelings,
capacities, or dispositions. He ultimately decides it is a disposition (a \( \varepsilon \xi \lambda \varsigma \)—literally, a ‘having’).

7. Crucially, it is not just a disposition to act in a certain way, but a disposition to feel things appropriately, as well, and to act for the right reasons: ‘the pleasure or pain that supervenes on what people do should be treated a sign of their dispositions; for someone who holds back from bodily pleasure and does so cheerfully is a moderate person, while someone who is upset at doing so is self-indulgent’ (1104b4-6) and so on for the other virtues. This is an important and somewhat surprising point: virtues are deep, and depend on internal states, not just what one does (as ‘disposition’ might suggest). It also helps make it plausible that the virtuous life is the happy one, since one counts as virtuous only if one does virtuous actions accompanied with the feelings appropriate to them.

8. Another way of thinking about virtue: as a mean. Aristotle famously characterizes the individual virtues as hitting a mean in some respect—weirdly this has come into our culture as hitting ‘a golden mean’, though that phrase is not Aristotelian. To be virtuous ‘is to be affected when one should, at the things one should, in relation to the people one should, for the reasons one should, and in the way one should’ (1106b21-23). This is evocative but the doctrine is difficult to make sense of, and I’ll leave that for section to discuss.

3 How do we get to be virtuous?

1. This raises an important question: Virtues should sound pretty great by now. But how do we get to be educated into the virtues? This is a hard question, because if virtues were just behavioral dispositions, it would be relatively easy to see how you could come to have them. But virtues are supposed to be accompanied by the set of motivations and feelings proper to them, and it’s harder to see how one could acquire this sort of thing.

2. What does Aristotle say about this? How do we come to have the virtues?

3. We have them not by nature—cp. capacities like vision—but through habituation—i.e., through doing virtuous activities repeatedly. An analogy with craftswork: one learns to play instruments or build by playing instruments and building well.

4. Now there are two further questions to ask about this. One is an individualistic question: how does this work in a particular case? This is in some ways the harder question. We have a framework answer, and we’ll talk more about it in a moment. The other is a political question: how do we ensure that a whole city be virtuous? This latter is a question Ar. answers straightforwardly at the end of NE: he says that the best way to ensure that a population becomes virtuous is to ensure that it has good laws, so this is the study that Aristotle turns to at the very end of NE. Note, emphatically, that it’s not by doing philosophy—Aristotle is decidedly pessimistic about the prospects of philosophy making people more virtuous.
5. Let’s return to the individualistic question. What do you think about Aristotle’s account, that we acquire virtues through habituation? Is this a good account of how we can acquire the virtues? Is there anything missing from it? Are there other ways of acquiring virtues? (take a minute to think—I’d like to hear from three different people on this)

6. There’s a serious problem Aristotle raises for it in II.4: it’s not clear that this account can really explain how we come to have the sort of dispositions that virtues are. As an account of acquiring a behavioral disposition it’s adequate; the issue is it doesn’t seem to explain how we could come to acquire the motivational set that’s supposed to go with the behavioral disposition to count as a virtue.

7. Why? The issue is that an action counts as virtuous only if it’s done for the right reasons. But generally speaking, one doesn’t yet know what the right reasons are until one has the virtue. So without having the virtue, it seems that one could do actions that are what the virtuous person would do without doing actions that are themselves virtuous—since without having the virtue, one will very likely be doing them for the wrong reason.

8. Aristotle seems to think that one can acquire the virtue by doing the right thing over and over again, even if one is doing it for the wrong reasons, i.e. not from a fixed virtuous disposition. But why should we think doing actions that are the very actions the virtuous person would do, but for the wrong reasons, would eventually make one virtuous?

9. Maybe a solution: living in the right kind of society with the right kind of norms. Two problems: (1) Really HARD to be virtuous—requires being born into a good, ethical society. (2) Ethical hierarchy: only a few people end up being virtuous, namely those born into the right society, and the right level of that society.

4 The Surprise Ending: Virtue and the Good Life

1. Up until the tenth book of NE the picture of the good life Aristotle has painted seems pretty straightforward. It’s the life of virtuous activity. Recall that there are virtues both of character and of intellect, so this will be a life of both practical activity—in particular political activity, but also virtuous activity more generally—and of intellectual activity.

2. But things get mixed up in Book X, in what a professor of mine calls the ‘surprise ending’ of the Ethics. It’s a hugely contentious issue to interpret what goes on here, and how it relates to the rest of the book.

3. But on the most straightforward reading, Aristotle seems to be backing off his earlier claim that happiness just is virtuous activity of the soul. He picks up on the claim that happiness is virtuous activity of the soul, but then qualifies it: not any kind of virtuous activity, but the best sort. And the best sort of virtuous activity will be the virtuous activity of the best part of us.
4. Recall *De Anima*: Aristotle has a picture of the human soul on which it is divided into parts. In DA it was a nutritive part, a perceptive part, and a reasoning part; in NE, he talks more about a division between an appetitive part and a reasonable part. The reasonable part is again divided into a part concerned with practical matters and a part concerned with theoretical matters. The last of these is *intelligence* or *mind*, νοῦς.

5. Where have we seen nous before? Recall the puzzle about first principles in the *Post. An.*: how do we ever get started knowing things, if all knowledge is by demonstration? Aristotle posited that we know first principles by perceiving them with the *nous*. It is *nous*, Aristotle thinks, that is the best part of the human; and so it is the activity of *nous* or the mind that is the most complete happiness. This sort of activity is contemplation.

6. Arguments for this:
   (a) ‘this element is thought naturally to rule and guide...
   (b) and to possess awareness of fine things and divine ones...the objects of *nous* are the highest knowables’ (1177a). Again, recall *PA*.
   (c) Activity of nous is the most continuous, since ‘we can engage in reflection continuously more than we can getting things done’ (1177a23).
   (d) Contemplation, and doing philosophy, are thought bring ‘pleasures amazing in purity and stability’ (1177a26).
   (e) Self-sufficient: for other than the necessaries of life, you don’t need much to contemplate; but you need a lot to be virtuous.
   (f) Contemplation has no benefits beyond itself, so it must be loved simply for itself (1177b2).
   (g) Contemplation is done in leisure, which is what we seem to aim for in other pursuits (1177b7)
   (h) Each of us seems actually to be this thing—*nous* (1178a3).

7. What would such a life look like? Not just sitting in a room and thinking. Remember that Aristotle didn’t distinguish academic disciplines the way we do—for him, it would be a life of academic or intellectual work, unfettered by practical interests (the word for ‘contemplate,’ ὑποτιθομαι, comes from the word ‘to see’ and could also be translate ‘to look around’)

8. This life is in principle unavailable to humans. But the fact that Aristotle includes discussion of it suggests that it might be something we should strive for. Ultimately this is a tension at the heart of Aristotle’s ethics, between the good life for the humans that, unfortunately, we are, and the good life for humans as we might strive to be. It’s very hard to know what to do with this tension. Recall how insistent Ar. is that this is a practical book: how should we manage this tension in practical life?

9. Aristotle doesn’t tell us, but the following passage is suggestive, and one of my favorite passages from all of Aristotle, so I’ll end with it: ‘Such a life will be higher than the human plane; for it is not in so far as he is human that he will live like this, but in so far as there is something divine in him...one should assimilate to the immortals’ (1177b26-1178a1).