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Honors 213

Aristotle's Logical Ethics

Considering that Aristotle was one of the fundamental forces behind the development of logical systems, it is of no surprise that a strict systematic logic pervades his philosophical texts. Aristotle's philosophy lends its credibility to the logical foundation upon which it is laid. He attempted to define intangible concepts by finding bases for them in reality and using logical methods to deduce their meanings to a more accurate and acceptable degree. Aristotle's arguments regarding concepts such as virtue and justice follow clear, logical patterns in order to reach believable conclusions. Every progressive step in his argument logically follows from preceding steps, all of which are based upon an axiomatic system in which certain definitions and relations are taken to be true. Aristotle carefully defines these default axioms and definitions in the beginning of his line of reasoning in order to develop a strong argument from that foundation; as his arguments progress, as a result, he is able to prove cases that are otherwise not particularly intuitive. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is a prime example of such a logically-induced argument; by developing a clear set of axioms and using the process of deduction, Aristotle is able to clarify the nature of "the good" and "happiness." He ultimately defines happiness – an otherwise obscure and subjective concept – by forming a conclusion from a logical progression of deductions, all of which follow from carefully-defined definitions of more concrete notions (and axioms based upon these definitions). One must sift through the ten books of the *Ethics* in order to discern the skeleton of the argument; the logical progression of it can become lost in the density of the text. Aristotle thus provides a clear development of his argument for happiness by beginning with a discussion of the good for man, continuing to discussions of moral virtue, intellectual virtue, continence/incontinence and pleasure, friendship, and finally concluding with pleasure and happiness. When the skeleton of the text's argument is outlined, its logic becomes all too apparent; it appears more as a mathematical proof than a

philosophical text. From the complexity of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, its truly simple and logical nature can be revealed; only then can its conclusion be properly understood.

Aristotle begins the *Ethics* with a clear statement of the subject of his inquiry. He introduces a concept of "the good," toward which all human actions aim. Greater (more virtuous) actions lead to greater goods, and lesser actions procure lesser goods; all of these measures of good are subordinate, then, to a greatest good, as Aristotle discusses and proves in Book I of the *Ethics*. This ultimate good, Aristotle hypothesizes, must be entirely self-sufficient; it exists for its own sake and is an end in itself. Such a good, Aristotle admits, is unachievable by man; nonetheless, "Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right? If so, we must try, in outline at least, to determine what it is, and of which of the sciences of capacities it is the object" (cf. 1094 a). This, then, is the hypothesis of Aristotle's *Ethics*; he intends to discover what is "the good" for man (in other words, he intends to illustrate how man may procure happiness, which is the resulting manifestation of reaching the good). Aristotle additionally notes that political science is the art that is necessary to attain the good, but he intends to concentrate on forming a definition of the good rather than providing instructions on how to attain it.

After this very brief introduction to the purpose of his treatise on ethics, Aristotle provides his audience with warnings regarding the nature of the text; he admits that the clarity of the argument essentially relies upon the nature of the subject-matter. He intends to take into account a variety of arguments surrounding the good in order to best reach a conclusion about its nature. Aristotle recognizes that because the good is such an intangible concept, the definitions and axioms he provides must be accepted in order for the argument to maintain its validity.

Indeed, he makes the following acknowledgement, which is crucial to an understanding of his overall argument:

We must be content...in speaking of such subjects and with such premisses [sic] to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true and with premisses [sic] of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better. In the same spirit, therefore, should each type of statement be received; for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits..." (cf. 1094 b).

Aristotle recognizes the limitations of dealing with such an intangible concept in a logical and systematic fashion; his logic can only provide such precision as the subject-matter allows, and the conclusion must accordingly lie within these limitations. Nonetheless, he intends to use clear logic and defined premises in order to make his argument. He beseeches the audience to accept his conclusion by virtue of the validity (or lack thereof) of his argument; in other words, he asks the audience to first accept his outlined definitions and axioms and think of the conclusion/argument in terms of those basic premises.

After this preemptive justification of the argument, Aristotle returns to his investigation of the good. He intends to discover, in this section, that which is the good for man. He notes that the good for man is essentially happiness (thus extending his hypothesis). Aristotle accordingly discusses the good in terms of happiness by investigating various forms of life which are said to procure happiness. He mentions four types of life (the life of pleasure, life of honor, life of wealth, and life of contemplation) and notes the way in which each life supposedly procures some sort of goodness (cf. 1095 b). Aristotle returns to his defining of "the good" by studying it in terms of the actions carried out in life; he introduces the idea of actions that procure final states of being. In order to provide a basis for the rest of his argument, Aristotle first carefully defines the concept of "final": it is "that which [without qualification] is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else" (cf. 1097 a). He then applies this

definition to his argument, noting that happiness is considered beyond all other things to be chosen for its own sake rather than for the sake of something else. Other aspects of the lives previously outlined, such as pleasure, virtue, etc., are embraced for the sake of happiness rather than for the sake of themselves. Aristotle subsequently provides a definition for “self-sufficient” in order to add clarity to his argument; he defines it as being “that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing,” and he immediately notes that happiness is thought to be as such (cf. 1097 b). Aristotle, then, has a clear idea of what happiness *should* be, according to his definitions; all he must do, then, is prove that happiness is indeed the chief good and does follow logically from subordinate goods. From his definitions, Aristotle notes that “[h]appiness...is something final and self-sufficient, and is the end of action” (cf. 1097 b). As he had noted in his introduction, the audience must accept certain premises as valid in order to entertain the logic of the argument; his definitions of terms such as “final” and “self-sufficient,” then, must be accepted in order for the rest of the argument to make sense. This is, then, a very simple (and as of yet incomplete) axiomatic system.

Aristotle next intends to investigate that from which the good is formed. He discusses the rationality that is present within mankind and which divides man from animal, and he implies that man must use his rational principle properly in order to produce actions that will ultimately procure some level of goodness; Aristotle takes as an axiom the idea that rational choices are those in accordance with virtue. From his previous “axiom” stating that there exist four types of life, he asserts that the good is composed of these rationally-chosen virtues. In this vein, Aristotle introduces a postulate that connects virtue to the good and uses the definitions discussed previously. With this postulate, Aristotle can investigate the nature of the good by

examining its more tangible constituents; specific virtues, after all, are much simpler for a human mind to understand than a broad concept such as the good. His postulate, then, notes:

If...we state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence..., human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete. (cf. 1098 a)

This postulate is complicated in appearance, but it essentially ties together all of the previous axioms and definitions which Aristotle has provided. Given that there are four types of life, man's function in each type of life must differ from one to the next. Rationality must be present within the human soul, then, to account for such adaptation. A good man, accordingly, is a man who performs the duties of his life well (i.e., his rational principle has adapted well to his mode of life); his actions, therefore, are good. A set standard – in other words, an established virtue – exists such that a man's actions can be said to be good in comparison with it. Thus, given that all of this is true, the good arises from actions that exist in accordance with virtue. Additionally, if more than one virtue exists, the good is that which exists in accordance with the best of these virtues.

The treacherous beginning of Aristotle's task thus gives way to a much simpler argument in the body of the text. As previously mentioned, specific virtues are much easier to understand than the intangible concept of "the good." Aristotle thus launches into a lengthy discussion of moral virtue, describing how it is produced and how it is exhibited. Indeed, he asserts that "since...the present inquiry does not aim at theoretical knowledge like the others (for we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use), we must examine the nature of actions" (cf. 1103 b). Aristotle thus discusses the actions that suggest the influence of presence of virtue, and he

subsequently provides a definition for moral virtue through a process of elimination. Aristotle provides the axiom that the soul is composed of passions, faculties, and states of character; virtue, he suggests, must fall into one of these three categories, since it is also a part of the soul. In a pseudo-RAA argument, Aristotle concludes that, since the virtues are neither passions nor faculties, they are states of character (cf. 1105 b). In an attempt to discover its differentia, Aristotle uses the axiom regarding the composition of the soul in order to show that, since virtue is neither a faculty nor a passion (cf. 1106 a), it is not subject to excess or defect. Aristotle provides descriptive definitions of excess, defect, and the mean in order to add further clarity to his argument regarding the temperate nature virtue: “There are three kinds of disposition, then, two of them vices, involving excess and deficiency respectively, and one a virtue, viz. the mean...” (cf. 1108 b). Virtue, as Aristotle had illustrated in various examples, aims toward the realization of means in terms of passion and action; bravery, rather than cowardice or rashness, is an aim of virtue. Aristotle thus forms a conclusion regarding the definition for moral virtue: it is “a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it” (cf. 1107 a). Virtue results from the choices and actions of the rational principle, then; additionally, it consists of neither excess nor defect. With this understanding of virtue, Aristotle launches into a discussion of the various virtues and vices, providing the terms for the excesses/defects that stray from the ideal virtues. Since a virtue is a mean, any excess or defect implies a vice. The mean virtues (and their respective vices) for which Aristotle accounts include courage, temperance, honor, anger, social intercourse, and justice.

The account of the virtue of justice essentially turns into a lengthy preparatory discussion for Aristotle's *Politics*; the nature of its sub-argument is not entirely necessary for the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a whole, since it provides a description of and rationale for justice as a virtue. Aristotle divides justice into several different forms and, from them, begins to deduce the nature of justice in general (he continues this deduction in his *Politics*). The discussion of justice operates much like a microcosm of the overarching argument regarding happiness and the good. Upon ending his discussion of justice, Aristotle introduces the second type of virtue: intellectual virtue. He separates the intellect into the contemplative portion, which aims toward truth, and the calculative portion, which aims toward right desires. He accordingly provides definitions for chief intellectual virtues (such as science, art, practical wisdom, etc.) and continues from this step with a discussion of understanding (which answers to practical wisdom) and judgment (moral intuition). From this, Aristotle asserts that practical wisdom plays an essential role in the procurement of virtue. Just leaders are endowed with this type of wisdom, since they live in accordance with virtue and provide opportunities for their subjects to also live in accordance with virtue: "The man who is without qualification good at deliberating is the man who is capable of aiming in accordance with calculation at the best for man of things attainable by action" (cf. 1141 b). Practical wisdom and political wisdom are, essentially, the same state of mind; since, as Aristotle had already asserted, political wisdom attains virtue, practical wisdom must also attain virtue. Men who are endowed with practical wisdom (and who embrace their rationality) thus live in accordance with virtue, as previously postulated; these men are, accordingly, aiming toward the good.

Upon ending his discussion of intellectual virtue, Aristotle investigates the voices of incontinence and pleasure. He does so by defining six types of character and how they can be

handled; he also lists popular opinions regarding these types of character. He provides a descriptive introduction to this sub-argument, and, as always, Aristotle's faithfulness to a logical system of deduction is made absolutely clear:

We must, as in all other cases, set the observed facts before us and, after first discussing the difficulties, go on to prove, if possible, the truth of all the common opinions about these affectations of the mind, or, failing this, of the greater number and the most authoritative; for if we both refute the objections and leave the common opinions undisturbed, we shall have proved the case sufficiently. (cf. 1145 b)

As he has done several times before, Aristotle here provides a "map" of his intentions for his argument, thus making the logical nature of it even more apparent. In this instance, he provides the audience with his precise intentions as to how he intends to prove the argument; Aristotle even outlines a back-up method of proof if his argument fails in the first method. One can clearly see from this statement that Aristotle intends for his conclusions to result from deductive reasoning; he intends for his conclusions to be considered valid only if they follow logically from the argument he has presented. After this introduction, then, Aristotle provides accounts of the opinions he had mentioned and, true to his mathematically logical nature, provides contradictions to all of these opinions; from these contradictions, he is able to form a solution regarding how and why the incontinent man acts against knowledge. One opinion Aristotle confronts, for example, states that a man with practical wisdom cannot be incontinent; Aristotle argues, however, that a man who judges the good to be evil and, because he is incontinent, acts opposite to his judgments, will accordingly perform the good and thus exercises practical wisdom (cf. 1145 b – 1146 b). Additionally, Pleasure is discussed in a similarly systematic fashion. Aristotle provides three views that are hostile to pleasure and arguments on their respective behalves. He then uses a progressive line of reasoning to deduce that most pleasures are, in fact, bad. He first shows, according to his introduction, that pleasure is not a good; from

this conclusion, he deduces that pleasure is, accordingly, not the chief good. This is a very simple and direct system of logic.

A discussion of friendship next ensues. Like the previous sub-argument regarding justice, the discussion of friendship is a lengthy line of deductive reasoning that is subordinate to the argument as a whole. One would assume that Aristotle takes matters such as justice and friendship particularly to heart, since he elaborates on them to a somewhat unnecessary degree. As with the argument for justice, the argument for friendship is, structurally, a microcosm of the overall argument regarding the good. Aristotle's logical conclusion from his lengthy argument, then, is that the essence of friendship is community – it exists for men to live together.

Following this conclusion regarding friendship, Aristotle provides yet another discussion of pleasure. He again admits that “arguments about matters concerned with feelings and actions are less reliable than facts: and so when they clash with the facts of perception they are despised, and discredit the truth as well...” (cf. 1172 a). Following this brief disclaimer, Aristotle produces a very interesting argument in which he first provides previous arguments regarding pleasure (by philosophers such as Eudoxus and Plato) and immediately refutes those arguments. He thus discusses both opinions of pleasure (i.e., that it is either good or bad) and forms his own definition of it. Essentially, the value of pleasure is dependent upon the actions that attain it and the aims of those actions; pleasure gained from actions that procure virtue, for instance, is valuable. Pleasure that is merely for amusement, however, is not valuable.

Aristotle thus makes his transition into his surprisingly brief conclusion, which is an assessment of happiness (the finality of the good). Happiness, after all, is a purely good pursuit and not merely an amusement. Aristotle is satisfied that the concept of happiness follows from his ethical argument: “Now that we have spoken of the virtues, the forms of friendship, and the

varieties of pleasure, what remains is to discuss in outline the nature of happiness, since this is what we state the end of human nature to be” (cf. 1175 a). He accordingly summarizes the argument thus far, which is again proof of Aristotle’s tendency toward deductive reasoning. He intends to illustrate to his audience that the conclusion should be believable because it follows from a valid argument, in which each step logically follows from the next. Indeed, as Aristotle had supposed, happiness is the manifestation of the attainment of the good in man; it is “an activity in accordance with virtue, [and] it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue [...]. [T]his will be that of the best thing in us” (cf. 1177 a). Happiness, composed of the highest virtues, is the good at which all things aim. In its pure form, it is essentially unattainable; nonetheless, as Aristotle had noted in his introduction to the *Ethics*, if a man pursues an unattainable goodness, he will become increasingly closer to it nonetheless. Aristotle’s discussion of happiness simply ties together the body of the argument, which is where the significance of the *Ethics* lies. His discussion on happiness transitions to a discussion of politics, since (as he later asserts) the state provides for man’s happiness; Aristotle thus leads into the beginning of the *Politics*, given this valid conclusion regarding the nature of happiness.

Essentially, Aristotle’s embrace of logical methods of reasoning pervades even his philosophical works. By applying methods of reasoning to philosophical arguments, Aristotle manages to provide impressive conclusions regarding intangible concepts. His works are perhaps the closest man has ever come to defining aspects of life by means of reason. Through deduction, Aristotle builds valid arguments based upon given definitions, axioms, and postulates. With such a perspective in mind, Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, defines happiness and “the good” – a seemingly insurmountable task. The philosopher’s overwhelming faith in the

ability of pure reason to provide for any conclusion, however, overcomes all obstacles; he thus defines the seemingly indefinable.

Bibliography

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