

Nicomachean Ethics - Prof. Daniel's Talk

Introduction

This lecture explores **Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics**, one of the foundational texts of Western moral philosophy. We will know **Aristotle's concept of telos (purpose or end)**, the hierarchy of goods in human action, and his search for the highest good that organizes all human activity.

The discussion also addresses the challenge posed by the sophists who argued that all values are merely conventional, and how Aristotle responds with his theory of objective good rooted in human nature and purpose.

The Foundation: Every Action Aimed at Some Good - Telos

We are rational beings, and we make decisions with some purpose. We have been around the sun and have purpose in life - we want to achieve something appropriate to nature, responding to nature itself. This is what Aristotle calls final cause: we have an end, and that is what drives our nature. Each thing has a telos that asks us to grow intellectually and helps us to grow.

Even when people do evil things, they start by trying to achieve some good. We are not accidental beings - we are trying to achieve a final cause. We seek pleasure and some source of power. Inner motivation gives good. Sometimes good is an activity, and sometimes it's a product.

For example, sometimes we build a house that provides shelter - that's a product. Sometimes good is an activity that has no product, like friendship. Friendship is an activity that we engage in, and that activity itself supports our being and brings joy.

Examples of Telos in Society

We can train horses, we have activities, and clearly this gives us a sense of moral relation. We are trying to achieve something and achieve the common good. Space exploration is an activity that helps us go beyond the individual level to the social level. In society, we all have telos - we are achieving something because we are human beings and we have an end.

In society we have different goals. We are trying to make people good, and this depends on psychology and philosophy - people are getting different benefits. People make products that are useful and good across oceans, like generalship. What is the telos of a general? To win war

and develop strategy. People are running houses to build jobs. You want to protect wealth, and these are the various purposes people have. This activity is functional.

When Society Becomes Dysfunctional

However, certain sectors of society are doing something that is not tied to common ends. The end of medicine is to treat people, but some people are using medicine so that they become rich. They are not providing products at affordable prices. When this happens, certain sectors have become dysfunctional.

The Hierarchy of Purposes

At all levels, we are pursuing telos, and there is a kind of hierarchy to this. You start slow, and then that activity serves a bigger activity, which serves another activity, which serves an even bigger activity.

Consider riding a horse: you need a bridle to control the horse. The trained horse will move according to your direction. Someone is making the bridle, but the bridle is not an end in itself. The making of the bridle serves a higher purpose - they make bridles so that people can ride horses. Why do we ride horses? For transportation, and also in war.

But why are we fighting wars? We fight wars to protect our country and acquire new resources. So war is subordinate to the generals' higher purpose. The generals study how to conduct warfare - this is generalship, and this creates a hierarchy. This is how society is structured.

Ruling Sciences vs. Supporting Sciences

People make windows for houses. Why are they making houses? Because people need to live - human beings need to live for certain goals. Take the science of making bridles - some sciences are ruling sciences and some are supportive. A war needs many things at the micro level. It needs medicine, food, and these should be supportive to the general. We have this hierarchy of sciences, where some rule and others support.

The Search for the Highest Good

Now we come to the key concept: we all have goals, and we are always pursuing an end for the sake of other ends. This creates a life cycle where we do something for something else, which is for something else. Think of the story of Sisyphus, eternally pushing the boulder up the hill.

Are we always doing something for the sake of something else? No, we are not, because there is something called the highest good. For this highest good, we are not the means but rather it is the final end.

We do many things in a day. Is any single thing the highest good? Take medicine - it's good, but is it the highest good? No. Why? Because we want to feel good, we want to be healthy. What is this end that we desire and seek for its own sake, while every other thing we seek is because of this highest good? The highest good organizes our life. It represents our ultimate values, and everything leads to this highest good.

Why There Must Be a Highest Good

Why is it impossible for us to always do something merely as a means to something else? If we are always doing something for something else in an infinite series, then everything becomes a means and we are never actually valuing anything final.

You exercise - for what? To be healthy and look good. Why do you want to be healthy? For a good life. Everyone becomes a way to something else, everyone has multiple values, but everything has value for something else. This creates a problem.

Aristotle uses the example of an archer. Someone shooting an arrow must aim at a target. This target represents the highest good - what we are all trying to achieve. What is this ultimate value? We have a target, and we should try to identify this highest good. This highest good is not only for individuals but also guides various sciences.

Political Science and the Highest Good

Some sciences rule over all other sciences. Some make products, some pursue medicine, but there is a key idea here: What is the ultimate ruling science for the community as a whole? While the soul belongs to the individual, society creates a paradox. The fundamental truth is that society is political and aims for the highest good.

We can think outside the box here. We have different demographic groups thinking about different issues through different means. Aristotle is talking about a group of people pursuing the highest good. Someone who contemplates the highest good has the goal of organizing society around this highest good.

We don't need to go through boring data, but we do need to think about ultimate values and organize things properly so that generals can make society function well. We need to conduct war under the guidance of the highest good, and this should be done in the right way at the right time. When we organize society, people should have their goals clearly defined. The role of the philosopher is to define the highest good.

The Challenge of the Sophists

We have this idea forming - we try to find ethics and live in a healthy way. But what is the highest good? There is a problem here, and this problem concerns a particular group. Plato identified sophists as people who think they can argue for any position. They use arguments not

to reveal truth but to show that there is no truth. They argue for contradictions - they say this is true and the opposite is also true.

A sophist treats arguments as if they can prove anything and nothing. These are people in politics and media who will argue for anything. For them, what is good depends on convention, not on nature.

The Debate: Convention vs. Nature

According to the sophists, what is good is based on convention - it's just a matter of social custom, and there is no universal human nature. We have various social customs. In the UK, people drive on the left side; in the US, they drive on the right side. There's no inherent need to choose right or left - there's just a need for social coordination.

Consider how we greet each other. In the US, we shake hands when meeting for the first time. In other countries, they hug or kiss on the cheek. Neither is wrong - they are just certain customs. Maybe everything we do, all our rules, are conventional and not defined by nature.

But we do have human nature, and some things are objectively wrong. We have values that represent universal human nature. Culture determines where you're from, but sophists claim everything is only convention, that there are no universal values. This is a radical position. This idea becomes a sort of imperialism of values - humans create certain forms of values, and ethics becomes a matter of relativity. When you say everything is convention and depends on what happens to exist, it seems dangerous because it makes everything slippery and removes all certainty.

Plato vs. Aristotle on the Nature of Good

Plato thinks there is a universal form of good - an objective truth that exists independently. But this approach is not sensitive to context. Something that is good may be good in a certain context but not in others.

Consider wealth. When we have wealth, we can achieve more things. But for some people, wealth can be harmful - it alienates them from others. If I become super wealthy, I might become arrogant, and nobody will love me.

Consider bravery. Someone who is brave takes risks and is not afraid. Bravery can be practiced and developed. But we can also take too many risks. So something that is good may not be good in every case. This creates a situational ethics where we don't have certain absolute rules.

Situational Ethics

Kant says that we can never lie. But in situational ethics, it depends on the situation. There are cases where truth is essential, but the situation matters. We can't argue for just anything - there is truth in ethics, but it's rough and general in outline. We can have a general sense of right and

wrong, but there's no single universal form. There are exceptions, and this approach is more sensible and prudent.

Ethics cannot achieve the exactness of mathematics. Ethics will be contextual. We use rhetoric to convince people, we seek the right approach for the right people, but this is not an exact science, and there are no absolute rules.

Aristotle's Response to the Sophists

The sophist argues for whatever suits their immediate purposes. But there must be something that guarantees truth - something ultimate. For Aristotle, there is an objective account of the highest good.

When Aristotle uses the word "good," what does it mean? It means telos - it is purpose. For every action, we can ask: what is its purpose? The purpose could result in a product or could be an activity itself. What is good appears to be knowledge - it has values that we can understand and pursue.

Conclusion

Through this exploration of Aristotelian ethics, we see how Aristotle attempts to ground morality in objective reality rather than mere convention. His concept of telos provides a framework for understanding human action as purposeful and directed toward meaningful ends. The hierarchy of goods culminates in the highest good, which organizes all other pursuits and gives coherent meaning to human life.

Unlike the sophists who reduce ethics to pure relativism, or Plato who seeks universal forms divorced from practical context, Aristotle offers a middle path. His ethics is objective yet contextual, universal in principle yet practical in application. This approach recognizes that while ethics cannot achieve the precision of mathematics, it can still provide genuine guidance for human flourishing.

The role of the philosopher, in Aristotle's view, is not to impose arbitrary rules but to discern and articulate the highest good that emerges from human nature itself. This highest good serves as the organizing principle that gives direction and purpose to both individual lives and political communities.