

# Episode 267 - Virtue Is Not Absolute Or An End In Itself - All Good And Evil Consists In Sensation.

Post by “Don” of February 8, 2025 at 4:59 PM

fwiw - Here is my (on-going!) look at Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics in light of Epicureanism:

[Epicurean Sage - Nichomachean Ethics Book 1](#)

< Back to Nichomachean Ethics homepage Nicomachean Ethics starts out with: “Every art and every investigation, and likewise every practical pursuit or...  
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For example, (an excerpt):

## Quote

At 1097b, Aristotle states “What is always chosen as an end in itself and never as a means to something else is called final in an unqualified sense. This description seems to apply to happiness above all else: for we always choose happiness as an end in itself and never for the sake of something else. Honor, pleasure, intelligence, and all virtue we choose partly for themselves – for we would choose each of them even if no further advantage would accrue from them – but we also choose them partly for the sake of happiness, because we assume that it is through them that we will be happy. On the other hand, no one chooses happiness for the sake of honor, pleasure, and the like, nor as a means to anything else.”

First, the word translated happiness here is εὐδαιμονία eudaimonia which I prefer to translate as “well-being.” LSJ provides various translations within its short entry: prosperity, good fortune; true, full happiness. The interesting issue is that Epicurus also made liberal use of the word eudaimonia as well. But did he identify it with The Good or the ultimate, final end? A quick search of writings brings up:

Vatican Saying 33. The body cries out to not be hungry, not be thirsty, not be cold. Anyone who has these things, and who is confident of continuing to have them, can rival the gods for happiness. σαρκὸς φωνὴ τὸ μὴ πεινῆν, τὸ μὴ διψῆν, τὸ μὴ ῥιγοῦν· ταῦτα γὰρ ἔχων τις καὶ ἐλπίζων ἔξειν [hope or expect to have] κἂν <δὲ [dative of Zeus]> ὑπὲρ εὐδαιμονίας μαχέσαιο. [contend/compete]

Fragment 548. Happiness and bliss are produced not by great riches nor vast possessions nor exalted occupations nor positions of power, but rather by peace of mind, freedom from pain, and a disposition of the soul that sets its limits in accordance

with nature. τὸ εὐδαιμον καὶ μακάριον [happiness and blessedness, latter same word as in PD1] οὐ χρημάτων πλῆθος οὐδὲ πραγμάτων ὄγκος οὐδ' ἀρχαί τινες ἔχουσιν οὐδὲ δυνάμεις, ἀλλ' ἀλυπία καὶ πραότης παθῶν καὶ διάθεσις ψυχῆς τὸ κατὰ φύσιν ὀρίζουσα.

...[and so on with several other Epicurean citations, commentary, etc.]

And on a later page in my admittedly snarky commentary...

Quote

Aristotle then gets to the heart of his definition of virtue, quoting Ostwald:

"Virtue or excellence is a characteristic involving choice, and that it consists in observing the mean relative to us, a mean which is defined by a rational principle, such as a man of practical wisdom would use to determine it. It is the mean by reference to two vices: the one of excess and the other of deficiency... virtue is a mean, but in regard to goodness and excellence it is an extreme. " (1106b-1107a)

LOL! There is SO much that is problematic here from my perspective. Allow me to break down my issues with Aristotle's exhortations.

He defines "virtue" (excellence, ἀρετή arete) as a characteristic/disposition (ἕξις hexeis) which remember is a "trained habit, skill, state or habit of mind" determining the choice of actions. We choose actions all the time! Epicurus puts great importance on our responsibility to choose our actions and that which we reject. The "choice" Aristotle uses here is προαίρεσις (proairesis), 'choice' or 'purpose', which he discusses in Book 3.2. It is obviously connected with the the word Epicurus uses, hairesis, but we'll leave more discussion until Book 3. So, the fact that "virtue" is connected with choices, yeah, okay, that seems mildly non-controversial. Go on...

But the mean/middle is "defined" (and we're using that word loosely, Aristotle) by a "rational principle" such as a person using practical wisdom would use to determine it! LOL! So, virtue is something that we choose by using practical wisdom - phronesis? So, far, I don't think we've defined practical wisdom either. Epicurus also places great importance on practical wisdom: It's one of the three things without which we can't experience a pleasurable life. It helps us make prudent decisions on which actions to choose and which to avoid. But Aristotle is going MUCH further in defining "virtue" in relation to this without even giving as much description as Epicurus!

And I love the last part! Virtue is a mean between extremes BUT "in regard to goodness and excellence it is an extreme"! Aristotle is attempting once again of trying to have it both ways. It sounds circular, self-refuting, and ridiculous. I am not impressed.

The next part makes me laugh as well! He goes to great length here of trying to define virtue as that elusive mean (that is actually an extreme of goodness remember)

between two extremes, but then says...

"Not every action nor every emotion admits of a mean... Some actions and emotions "whose very names connote baseness, e.g., spite, shamelessness, envy; and among actions, adultery, theft, and murder."

Those are just actions to my understanding. He's trying to say you can't "virtuously" commit adultery, theft, and murder. Duh! Epicurus would say those things do harm to others and so aren't just. They disrupt society or harm relationships. However, is it just to steal bread to feed your starving children? Is it "murder" if you kill someone while defending yourself? Someone may still have to be punished for the good of society BUT maybe not? Context and social contracts are key to Epicurus's discussion of justice... I'm not as sure he's getting hung up on "virtue."

Aristotle goes on to list some of these extremes, means, and deficiencies (1107b), but - egads! - "many virtues and vices have no name" as in not all excesses or deficiencies actually have a name. So, he's going to make up things that have no name, are not referred to in regular speech, don't actually exist, but for the sake of his argument, we're supposed to pretend they exist. Methinks he's starting to use unicorns and centaurs.

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