

Possible Paper Topics on the Nicomachean Ethics  
Philosophy 301 ( Boos )

1 Do you think Aristotle consistently carries through the doctrine that some sort of **'mean'** ( which may vary in sense from trait to trait and case to case; cf. Loeb 95,1106b-1107a10 ) provides a near-universal measure of virtue and **eudaimonia** ( cf. Loeb 33, 1098 a5-20 ) in Books III-VI of the **Nicomachean Ethics**? Or does 'the' mean seem a somewhat **ad hoc** notion, which applies when it applies, and doesn't when it doesn't? Why 'must' it even exist ( cf. Loeb 229, 1125b 18-20 )?

If you think the basic insight is worthwhile -- perhaps because it expresses a sense that a 'happy' life is well-modulated in some way, or achieves some kind of **'equilibrium'** ( think of the senses in which we use the word **"poise"** ) -- can you illustrate it with any examples Aristotle does **not** consider?

To which of the **'moral'** or **'intellectual'** virtues Aristotle does consider does the idea of the **'mean'** seem to apply **best**? **Worst**?  
2 I have asked in class how Aristotle thinks we **acquire** the **'disposition'** ( **hexis** ) he calls **eudaimonia**, given that children ( and "beasts" ) cannot be **'eudaimon'** ( Loeb 47, 1100a 1-5 ), and that virtues only arise from practice and from **ethos**, which our text translates as **"habit"** at the beginning of Book II ( 1103a15-20 ). Do we **'condition'** ( ? ) children to be **eudaimon**?

How, in other words, can we ( **begin to** ) **'habituate'** ourselves in the right way, if we must **practice** virtues in order to **develop** them? Does this question brush against any deeper open problems one might pose about the nature of moral character? Are there any passages in the **Nicomachean Ethics** which might suggest **'Aristotelian'** answers to these problems and questions?

3 In class, I quoted with a certain wry appreciation Aristotle's concise passing remark that most people "wish what is noble ( **ta kala** ) but choose what is profitable ( **ta ophelima** )" ( Loeb 507, 1162b35; **ophelima** might also be rendered as "serviceable" or "advantageous" ).

Do you agree? Do some of Aristotle's case-studies of particular virtues ( **philia**, say, in Books VIII and IX ) seem to bear out or contradict this epigram? If the ground-state of human behavior is a kind of moral mediocrity, as Aristotle's remark seems to suggest, are there any lines of argument in the **Nicomachean Ethics** to which he might appeal, to explain **why** ( he thinks ) this is so?

4 One of the better-known passages in the **Nicomachean Ethics** is Loeb 613-619 ( 1177a11-1178a8 ). in which Aristotle returns to the notion of **eudaimonia** introduced in Book I, and identifies its most **'divine'** form with an idealised form of activity ( **energeia** ) and self-realisation which he calls **theoria** ( usually translated "contemplation"; we have no appropriate one-word-rendering for this notion, which involves a visual metaphor in Greek, and refers roughly to the attainment and steady exercise of a kind of reflective **"insight"** ).

Do you think there is any real interrelation between this notion and that of the **"mean"**, introduced in Book II? Does Aristotle, in the end, seem to propose a kind of **two-tiered** account of humane goodness, a more **'pragmatic'** ( ? ) one involving the **"mean"**, and a more **'kalon'** one which requires **theoria**?

Does **theoria**, moreover, have significant aspects we might consider **'emotional'** rather than **'intellectual'**, despite the meanings the word **'theory'** have acquired in English?

How, above all, does Aristotle seem to think we might **achieve** the **bios theoretikos** ( reflective life )? Might this **'divine'** quality, in the end, turn out to be a gratuitous gift of the gods ( like some christian notions of "grace" )?

## Stoic and Epicurean Ethics: Possible Paper- and Discussion-Topics

1 The stoics and epicureans both seem to have sought a kind of ethical '**detachment**' ( cf., e. g., the "greatest joy"-passage from Book II of *De rerum natura* on page 22 of our anthology, and the indifference to circumstance advocated in SVF III 117, 166, 188 and 574, pp. 118, 120, 121 and 132 ).

Is this an intrinsic good in your view? Is it related in some way to ( something like ) what the English Romantic poet Wordsworth later called "emotion recollected in tranquillity"?

Might it also represent -- in part, at least -- a sublimated desire for **control**, as well as a need for something like what Aristotle called **theoria**? If desires for distance and control are natural -- as well as ( perhaps ) "in accordance with nature" -- might there still be a need for some sort of Aristotelian 'mean', to modulate them?

2 The stoics and the epicureans also agreed that deeper understanding of 'the' ( ? ) natural world-order would foster and inform the **ataraxia** ( unperturbedness ) they both sought, even though they disagreed about the **nature** of that world-order in many details.

What **other** sorts of assumptions about "the natural world" did this common belief seem to embody, as far as you can gather from the quotations we have? Are they **really** compatible with the view that the physical world is ordered in ways that are vast, inscrutable and perhaps inexorable, as some atomists ( who influenced the stoics ) and students of **pneuma** ( the all-pervasive mixture of fire and breath studied by the stoic Chrysippus ) seemed to think?

If that order, in short, really **does** reflect a famous rhetorical question of the unknown author or authors we call **Ecclesiastes** --

**"What is man ( sic ), that thou art mindful of him"**

( a dictum also engraved in enormous stone letters across one side of the building which houses the Harvard philosophy department ) -- **why** should any of us find that **soothing**?

Is it perhaps because we **really** assume -- on **faith**, in the end -- that this inscrutable and impassable universe **will**, after all, be "**mindful of us**", at least a little bit? Like a kindly parent of a frail but fondly-regarded child?

Did the stoics and epicureans, in other words, implicitly have to **beg** some sort of **theodicy** for the "natural order(s)" in which they believed, and from which they derived such peace and consolation?

Do we?

3 Do you think there is anything ethically relevant to the epicurean argument that death is nothingness, so "**death is nothing to us**" ( Lucretius, in our anthology, page 36 ). Is it simply therapeutic sophistry? If we fear dissolution and disintegration of our identity in life -- as we most emphatically do seem to do -- why should we **not** fear and dread the ultimate limiting case of such dissolution in death? Is the substance of Epicurus' argument really little more than that of a remark by Wittgenstein which I quoted in class ( roughly, "**Man erlebt ja den eigenen Tod nicht**" -- "One doesn't 'live through' one's own death" )?

4 The stoics were well-aware of the strains between their austere **deterministic physics** and their equally austere notions of **personal identity** and **ethical autonomy**. Chrysippus, for example, tried to resolve this dilemma with distinctions between "preliminary" and "determining" causes ( cf. the passages in our anthology on pages 108 and 109 ).

Do you think there is any reasonable hope that ( more sophisticated versions of ) **any** such arguments -- stratification of deterministic "causes", for example, or suspension of them in the cases of mental behavior and activity -- might **work**?

Or does someone who believes that modern physics impose a deterministic time-evolution on all phenomena, including those which appear to involve "choice", really face this dilemma in essentially undiminished form?

Is "( **what is** ) in our power", in short, "**in our power**" ( to use one of Epictetus' favorite phrases )? Or is our 'free will' a kind of epiphenomenal **illusion**, in the end, whether we are ( predetermined to be ) stoics or not?