ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS TUTORIAL READING AND ESSAYS

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2015

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INTRODUCTION

READING

Generally the reading is given in the order in which I'd suggest reading it. Usually I assign relatively little reading, but it's really important that you read it all: if you leave any out, you're likely to have a gap in your understanding of the topic that will make it very difficult to answer the essay question. (Note also that for the vast majority of papers, reading them once is not enough: there are very few papers that I could understand after one reading.) By all means let me know if there's any week in which you think I've assigned too much (or too little) reading.

ESSAY

Your essays should be around 2000 words; that's about four single spaced pages. A little more or less is fine, but keep it under 2500 words. When you email your essay to me, *cc everyone else in your tutorial group*. And be sure to read and think about your tutorial peers' essays. Email your essay to me by 3 PM the day before the tutorial (unless I specify another time). If it's later than this, I might not get a chance to read it.

Please pay close attention to the following pieces of advice, especially 1 and 2. They try to cater for the most common and most easily solved problems I find in students' essays.

1. *Explain*. In short: explain *everything*. It should be possible for an intelligent peer who hasn't studied philosophy to understand your essay without needing to look up the words you use or read the authors you're writing about. So, for example: if you use a technical term or mention a concept that has particular significance for an author, make absolutely sure you clearly define/explain it; similarly, for any argument or position you discuss, you must clearly explain this argument or position to your reader. This is partly because good academic writing should be easily understood, but this is not the only or even the main reason. Rather, your ability to explain the ideas you're discussing—clearly, precisely, and succinctly—is one of the principal things you're being assessed on. You might well know, say, what a categorical imperative is, but you need to *show* that you know it and how precisely you know it. Explaining even small, simple ideas well is a lot harder than you might think; don't underestimate how important it is, and how much work it takes.
2. *Justify*. Assume that for every claim you make, the reader is asking 'why should I believe that?' In a philosophy essay, there should always be an excellent answer to this question. You should consider this to be, above all else, your aim when writing an essay. The worst thing you can do is to make bold assertions without defending them, and the second worst is to make bold assertions and defend them weakly. Note that this includes interpretive claims: if you write 'Plato believes that p', you need to show your reader, perhaps by giving a supporting

quote, that this is indeed something Plato believes.

A bad essay: 'p!'
A good essay: 'For reasons x, y, and z, it seems that p.'
An excellent essay: 'Reasons x, y, and z give us good grounds for thinking that p, although someone might offer an objection along the following lines … However, I think there is a promising response to this objection …'

3 *Use headings*. Before you start writing, sketch a structure for your essay. When writing, use headings that reflect this structure. A typical essay might have 2–4 headings.

4 *First understand, then assess*. Be careful not to rush into criticisms of what you read before you've fully understood it. Approach everything you read with charity. That is, assume (since it is likely) that the author has thought intelligently and carefully about what they've written, so is unlikely to have made simple, obvious mistakes. For example, if you notice a *prima facie* objection to something you're reading, read it again carefully to see if there's a way to understand it that avoids the objection or try to think of a plausible implicit assumption the author might have made that caters for the objection.

5 *Ensure your conclusions reflect your arguments.* You might have been taught that strong, persuasive prose requires confident assertions, rather than hesitant, qualified ones. This is not the case in philosophy: your assertions should reflect the actual degree of confidence that is warranted by the evidence you've provided. Decisive arguments are rare—even rarer are decisive arguments in just a few lines of a student's essay. So be very careful not to mistake considerations that give us a good reason for believing that p for an argument that conclusively proves that p. A good essay is likely to have a large range of (appropriate) qualifying phrases: 'this shows decisively that p'; 'this is a very strong reason to believe that p'; 'this suggests that p'; 'this makes it less implausible that p'; and so forth.

6 *Use quotes*. Especially in historical subjects, including quotes from the relevant primary texts can be an excellent way to illustrate, justify, and give some focus to your discussion. One way (of many ways) to use a quote would be the following: make a claim; present a quote that you think backs up the claim; and then explain and interpret the text of the quote in order to show that and why it backs up your claim. (Two cautions: first, quotes from secondary sources are often less useful; second, avoid using a quote as a way of *saying* something; rather, a quote should play the role of evidence *about which* you have something to say.)

7 *Go from general to particular*. The topics we'll look at are very broad. One could reasonably spend years writing hundreds of pages about them—you only have a few pages and one week. This presents a challenge: on the one hand, you want to cover the whole topic, showing that you're familiar with all the major issues that arise; on the other hand, you want to do more than simply scratch the surface, never looking at any issue in detail. This can be a difficult balance to achieve, but in general it is much better to *err on the side of detail*. A good approach might be to devote about the first third or half of your essay to a more general discussion of the essay topic and then use the last half or two-thirds to examine one

or two smaller points in much greater detail—you might, for example, focus on one argument, premise, or objection that you think is especially important or interesting.

SOME BASICS OF TYPOGRAPHY

The following are a few typographic conventions worth learning:

1. *Indent paragraphs.* But do not indent the opening paragraph of the document or the first paragraph after a section heading. You may instead—not in addition—separate paragraphs with a blank line, although this is better suited to list-like texts, such as legal documents, than continuous prose.
2. *Use single line spacing.* It's easier to read. Double spacing is only necessary when a printed copy of you work will be annotated.
3. *A footnote mark is always placed after punctuation.*[1] It is almost always best to place a footnote at the end of the sentence, *after* the sentence-ending full stop, even if you are referring to something earlier in the sentence. Avoid consecutive footnotes; instead, place all information in one footnote if possible.
4. *Indicate quotes with either quotation marks or by using a block quote.* Extra flourishes, such as italicising, are unnecessary. And never place a block quote within quotation marks.
5. *Learn the difference between a hyphen (-), en-dash (–), and em-dash (—).* Use an en-dash like 'to' in ranges of dates or numbers (e.g. 87–142) and to express certain relationships between words: for example, an 'on–off switch' or 'Irish–American relations'. Either an en- or em-dash can be used to indicate a parenthetical phrase. If you use an en-dash, add a space either side – like so – but em-dashes are always unspaced—like so.
6. *Make ellipses with three full stops separated by spaces.* Like this . . . , with a space either side. You will most commonly use an ellipsis to indicate portions of text that you've omitted from quotes. Don't omit any sentence-ending full stops that precede an ellipsis (i.e. together they make four stops). For example:

   > [P]articular care needs to be exercised when eliding text to ensure that the sense of the original is not lost . . . A deletion must not result in a statement alien to the original material. . . . Accuracy of sense and emphasis must accompany accuracy of transcription. (*CMS*, 16th, 13.49)

7. *Use a single space after full-stops.* A double space, once common, is now rightly recognised as unnecessary.

REFERENCING

In your essays you should reference both quotes and claims or arguments that originate from one of the authors you've been reading. You should also have a bibliography of all the works you've referred to in the text.

1. This includes full stops, commas, colons, semi-colons, and quotations marks.

You can use whatever bibliographical style you choose, so long as it's consistent. The following is an example of a typical author–year referencing style, starting with what the bibliography will look like:

Book: Author (Year) *Title*, Place: Publisher.

> Fine, G. (1993) *On Ideas*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
>
> Freeman, S. (ed.) (2003) *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Article: Author (Year) 'Title', *Journal*, Volume, pp. Pages.

> Irwin, T.H. (1977) 'Plato's Heracleiteanism', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 27, pp. 1–13.

Article in book: Author (Year) 'Article Title' in Editor(s) (ed(s).) *Book Title*, Place: Publisher.

> Scanlon, T.M. (2003) 'Rawls on Justification' in S. Freeman (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

In-text citation: (Author, Year, Page(s))

> It has been argued that the charge of conservativism laid against Rawls' idea of reflective equilibrium is unsound (Scanlon, 2003, pp. 150–151).
>
> Scanlon argues that the charge of conservativism laid against Rawls' reflective equilibrium is unsound (2003, pp. 150–151).

PLAGIARISM

The university guidelines are here: www.admin.ox.ac.uk/epsc/plagiarism. From the college regulations:

> Plagiarism is the presentation of someone else's work without acknowledgement as if it were your own. Typically, this involves copying an essay from another student or from the Internet, or copying passages from a book without quotation marks and a clear page reference. It is a very serious offence to plagiarise someone else's work, and there are serious academic penalties which may include the offender being sent down from the College and the University. … Please also be aware that poor academic work practices, such as copying sections directly from academic articles into your notes for information, might lead to unintentional plagiarism, but that this unintentional offence will still be dealt with severely by the University as 'reckless' plagiarism.

Two good reasons not to plagiarise. 1. I'll spot it. It's really easy. 2. If you think about it, there is really no advantage to plagiarising an essay, just serious disadvantage if you're caught. The most you'll gain, if you're lucky, is to make me believe that you wrote an essay when you didn't—but why would you care what I believe? If you genuinely can't write an essay for whatever reason, try to write part of an essay, some notes, or—in the worst case—nothing.

WEEK 1: THE HUMAN GOOD & THE FUNCTION ARGUMENT

READING:

1 Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 1 [The translation we'll be using is T. Irwin's (Hackett Publishing, 1999). Translations vary considerably, in both content and quality, so it's important to stick to this edition. It also has very helpful notes]

2 D. Bostock *Aristotle's Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), chapter 1

3 J. Whiting 'Aristotle's Function Argument: A Defense' *Ancient Philosophy* 8 (1988) 33–48

Optional reading:

4 G. Lawrence 'Human Good and Human Function' in R. Kraut *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Blackwell: Oxford, 2006) 37–75 [This Blackwell guide has plenty of articles useful for this course]

5 R. Barney 'Aristotle's Argument for a Human Function' *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 34 (2008) 293–322 [Barney looks at Aristotle's argument for the claim that human's have a function]

ESSAY:

Two parts; do both.

(A) Explain and assess the function argument of 1.7. What is intended to show? How does it relate to the stated purpose of the ethics? What are its premises and what assumptions underlie them?

(B) In about the last half or third of your essay, look in detail at *one* of (3)–(6) below.

Some questions to think about:

1 What does Aristotle mean by 'virtue', 'function', and 'happiness'? How does Aristotle think they are related? How does the function argument help to relate them?

2 What does it mean to say that for anything that has a function or activity, 'the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function'?

3 What does it mean to say that humans have a 'function' (*ergon*)? What does Aristotle mean by 'function'—is it just what we mean when we say that, for example, the 'function' of a hammer is driving nails? What objections can you raise against the idea that humans have a 'function'? What arguments can you give in support of the idea?

4 What is the conclusion of the function argument? What exactly is 'activity of the soul in accord with reason or requiring reason'? (Note that this is not as obvious as it might at first appear.)

5 Is Aristotle equivocating between a good person—a well-functioning example of the species—and what's good *for* a person?

6 What implicit assumption explains the argument that the human function can't be nutrition, growth, or perception? Does Aristotle think that that the human function needs to be unique? And if so, why?

WEEK 2: VIRTUE AND THE DOCTRINE OF THE MEAN

READING:

1 Aristotle, books I.13, II, III.6–12, & IV

2 Bostock, chapter 2

3 J. Urmson 'Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 10 (1973) pp. 223–230; also in A. Rorty (ed.) *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (California: University of California Press, 1980) [An early—and very clear and short—account of the doctrine of the mean]

4 R. Hursthouse 'A False Doctrine of the Mean' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 81, (1980–1) pp 57–72 [A (highly) critical appraisal of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, as understood by Urmson]

5 L. Brown 'What is the "mean relative to us" in Aristotle's ethics?' *Phronesis* 42 (1997) pp 77–93

Optional reading:

5 H. J. Curzer 'A Defense of Aristotle's Doctrine that Virtue is a Mean' *Ancient Philosophy* 16 (1996) pp. 129–38 [A response to Hursthouse]

TO THINK ABOUT:

> Virtue, then, is a state that decides, consisting in a mean, the mean relative to us, with is defined by reference to reason, that is to say, to the reason by reference to which the prudent person would define it. (1107A)

As you read think about each element of this definition: what does it mean and how does Aristotle argue for it? (The role of reason and the prudent, practically wise person will become clearer when we consider the intellectual virtues.)

Also think about: How is virtue acquired? What is the role of pleasure and pain in good and bad states of character?

ESSAY:

> What is Aristotle's doctrine of the mean? And: (A) Is it plausible? (B) How should we understand his claim that the mean is 'relative to us'?

Write something in answer to both A and B, but discuss either A or B—whichever interests you more—in detail in the latter half of your essay.

WEEK 3: RESPONSIBILITY/VOLUNTARY ACTION

READING:

1. Aristotle, Book III.1–5, V.8
2. Bostock, chapter 5
3. T. Irwin 'Reason and Responsibility in Aristotle' in A. Rorty (ed.) *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*

As groundwork for this and the next topic, write up definitions of wish (*boulêsis*), deliberation (*bouleusis*), and decision (*prohairesis*). And consider: How does *prohairesis* relate to virtue of character? (Look back to II.5–6)

ESSAY:

> Explain and assess Aristotle's argument that we are responsible for our characters.

Your essay should also consider more general questions, such as: what is Aristotle's definition of voluntary action? What exactly is the role of knowledge/ignorance? And of force? What is it to have one's human nature strained? What does it mean for an action to be 'up to us'? Early in your essay I'd like to see a brief but exact discussion that explains why Aristotle thinks *each* element of his account is required for an action to be voluntary.

WEEK 4: INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES I

Books II-V focused on character virtues, which are principally associated with the part of the soul that is responsive to reason but incapable of reasoning itself. Book VI, in contrast, considers the virtues of the part of the soul that reasons and, therefore, of the part of the soul that the non-rational part should be 'listening' to if we are to be virtuous. In VI your focus should be on understanding *phronêsis* ('prudence' or 'practical wisdom').

READING:

1 Aristotle book VI [Read very carefully, in conjunction with III.1–5 again, this time focusing in III on the definitions of *boulêsis* (wish), *bouleusis* (deliberation), and *prohairesis* (choice, decision).]

2 Bostock, chapter 4

3 C. Reeve 'Aristotle on the Virtues of Thought' in R. Kraut *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*

4 A. Mele 'Aristotle's Wish' *Journal of the HIstory of Philosophy* 22 (1984) pp. 139–156 [There's a lot in this article—it is worth reading twice.]

TO THINK ABOUT:

Aristotle considers five intellectual virtues: philosophical/theoretical wisdom (*sophia*), scientific knowledge (*epistemê*), intuitive understanding (*nous*), prudence/practical wisdom (*phronêsis*), and craft knowledge. Try get an understanding of each. Aristotle's main concern is practical wisdom, but are the others also essential to happiness? How are *sophia*, *epistemê*, and *nous* related? What is practical *nous*?

Consider also: Is *phronêsis* about the end or goal, or just about 'things toward the end' (means of some sort)? Why is *phronêsis* necessary for character-virtue and vice versa?

ESSAY:

(Yes, this is a very long question!)

> Aristotle seems to say that moral virtue consists in the unreasoning part of the soul being in a good state in relation to passions and actions, and that goodness, here, is a matter of whether that unreasoning part of the soul obeys reason (*logos*)… Since wisdom is right reason, moral virtue seems to be a matter of following the dictates of wisdom. Wisdom, however, appears to be characterized as excellence in determining the best way to attain a goal that is already established as a goal by our character – the state of the unreasoning part of the soul. If Aristotle really is committed to all of these theses, his position is indeed incoherent. For what the conjunction of these claims amounts to is that moral virtue is defined as the following of reason that is not, in itself, leading anywhere. (A.D. Smith 'Character and Intellect in Aristotle's Ethics' *Phronesis* 41 (1996) 56–74 at 56-57—it is worth reading the whole of the opening section of this article)

Does Aristotle's position suffer from this incoherence? If not, how does he escape it?

WEEK 5: INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES II

The same topic as last week, with new reading and essay title. Drawing on our discussion last week, this time make sure that you can defend a clear account of the relation between practical wisdom and character virtue—with solid textual evidence to back it up.

READING:

1. Reread last week's reading
2. Jessica Moss, "'Virtue Makes the Goal Right": Virtue and Phronesis in Aristotle's Ethics'
3. Heda Segvic, 'Deliberation and Choice in Aristotle' in Michael Pakaluk & Giles Pearson (eds.), *Moral Psychology and Human Action in Aristotle* (OUP, 2011)

ESSAY:

'Virtue makes the goal right, practical wisdom the things toward the goal'—how should we understand this claim?

WEEK 6: ARISTOTLE'S ACCOUNT OF *AKRASIA*

This topic is *hard* and the text is really tricky, so be sure to do the reading very carefully—read the relevant passages of the *Ethics* many times—and make sure you've got a good grasp of the basics before you begin writing your essay.

READING:

1. Aristotle, Book VII.1–10 [VII.3, where Aristotle gives his main account of *akrasia*, should be read in great detail]
2. Plato's *Protagoras*, 351B–357A [The Socratic account of *akrasia* that Aristotle rejects/modifies]
3. Bostock, chapter 6
4. A. Price 'Acrasia and Self-control' in R. Kraut (ed.) *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*

Optional reading:

5. R. Robinson 'Aristotle on *Akrasia*' in Barnes (ed.) *Articles on Aristotle* Vol 2 (Duckworth, 1977)
6. C. Taylor 'Plato, Hare and Davidson on *Akrasia*' *Mind* 89 (1980) 499–518
7. A. Kenny 'The Practical Syllogism and Incontinence' *Phronesis* 11 (1966) 163–184
8. You will also find David Charles' *Nich. Ethics* lecture notes—available on weblearn—for his two lectures on *akrasia* helpful.

ESSAY:

> What error does the akratic person make according to Aristotle? Is it a good explanation of what happens when we have this kind of experience?

Your essay should include a detailed reconstruction of what, according to Aristotle, the akratic person experiences. Be sure to have lots of references and interpretive discussions of the relevant passages—defend your reading through Aristotle, not through the secondary literature.

WEEK 7: PLEASURE

READING:

1 Aristotle, book VII.11-14, X.1-5.

2 Bostock, chapter 7

3 J. Urmson *Aristotle's Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), chapter 8

4 D. Frede 'Pleasure and Pain in Aristotle's Ethics' in R. Kraut (ed.) *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*

Optional reading:

5 L. Katz 'Pleasure' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [Some modern views on pleasure]

ESSAY:

Two parts; do both.

1) Are Aristotle's accounts of pleasure in book VII and book X consistent?

2) Is Aristotle's account—or either of his accounts—of pleasure plausible?

Think about:

1 Consider Aristotle's claim that pleasure is a type of activity—what are the advantages/disadvantages between thinking of pleasure as a state and thinking of it as an activity?

2 Aristotle's account in book X is difficult—think carefully about what he might mean when he says pleasure 'completes' the activity.

3 What role does pleasure play in the best life? Is Aristotle a hedonist?

WEEK 8: HAPPINESS RECONSIDERED: CONTEMPLATION

Arisototle's final discussion of happiness is surprising. Throughout the *Ethics*, Aristotle has emphasised how important character virtue is for happiness; at times it might even seem that, other than practical wisdom, the intellectual virtues are of very secondary importance. In book X, Aristotle *seems* to argue for the opposite: that character virtue is of secondary importance, and the most important constituent of happiness is the purely theoretical activity of contemplation. The aim this week is to try to understand to what extent this is what Aristotle is claiming and whether or not it leaves a meaningful role for character virtue in happiness.

READING:

1 Aristotle, book I & X.6-8.
2 Bostock, chapter 9
3 J. Ackrill 'Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*' in Rorty (ed.) *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*
4 T. Nagel 'Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*' *Phronesis* 17 (1972) pp. 252–259

ESSAY:

> How does Aristotle think contemplation (or 'study' – *theoria*) and virtuous action should combine in the best human life?

Be sure to look back at Aristotles' discussion of happiness in book I. For example, the conclusion of the function argument gives us an account of human happiness—does this help us understand his account of happiness in book X?