Notes on Nicomachean Ethics, Book II, M. Baumer, 9/29/97

A. NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, Book II--Moral Virtue in General

NOTE: In our translation "hexis" (one of the four basic kinds of quality) is rendered by "state" and "ethos" by "habit".

1. Chapter 1--Good and bad states, including moral and intellectual excellences and their opposites, come about through good and bad activities (actualities).
   a. Intellectual excellence comes about through teaching.
   b. Moral excellence comes about through habit (ethos). Arguments for this:
      (1) Confirmation through etymology: "ethike" (with a long e--Gk letter eta), "moral," resembles "ethos" (with a short e, Gk letter epsilon), "habit". NOTE: I don't know whether this etymology is correct or not.
      (2) Moral excellence cannot come about by nature, for there can be no habits opposed to what comes about by nature, [but there are habits opposed to moral excellence]. NOTE: syllogism: Three terms: moral excellence (A), what comes about by nature (B), there being opposed habits (C). To nothing of what comes about by nature are there opposed habits (to no B are there C), to (all or some) moral excellence there are opposed habits (to all or some A there are C), therefore nothing that comes about by nature is moral excellence (no B is A). This appears to be an obscure type of syllogism called "oblique" in PRIOR ANALYTICS. The second premise is just proved by examples of stone and fire.
      (3) Thus, from the previous argument, together with its premise that nothing
can be habituated contrary to its nature, it follows that excellences come about neither by nor contrary to nature. Instead, we are "adapted by nature" to receive them (nature provides a potentiality for them), and are made perfect by habit.

(4) Excellences are distinguished from natural potentialities by the temporal sequence of potentialities and their actualities[, and this confirms that they come about by habit.]

(a) For natural potentialities, we first acquire and then actualize them,

(b) Whereas for excellences we acquire them by actualizing ("exercising") them.

(5) In general, both good and bad states (Gk. singular hexis) have the same cause--they both arise out of the kind of activity that in turn arises out of the state.

(a) For the arts: (otherwise there would be not need for a teacher)
   i) Good and bad lyre-players from good and bad lyre playing
   ii) Likewise builders

(b) For the moral virtues:
   i) Just people from just acts
   ii) Courageous people from courageous acts

2. Chapter 2--The account of things to be done (attainment of the good) in outline--good and bad states both of the body and the soul both make possible and are produced by good actions (exercising, eating, aggressing, indulging)--that is, actions that are neither excessive nor deficient with respect to right reason.
a. Our inquiry does not aim at theoretical, [but practical] knowledge
   (1) For we do not aim to know what excellence is, but to become good, otherwise our inquiry would be of no use. (Why? Perhaps because knowledge of the good is useless without attaining the good--thus this point would not apply to all knowledge, but only to knowledge of the good.)

b. Thus we must investigate good actions (because moral excellence comes about only through them.)

c. Good actions are those in accordance with right reason. This will be investigated in more detail later.

d. An account of things to be done (the sphere of the practical) needs to be said in outline but not precisely, because
   (1) What is to be done and the good have no fixity in general
   (2) And even less in particular.
   (3) Examples: medicine, navigation.
   (4) NOTE: This appears to be because the realm of the singular contains many contingent causes (like human choices and chance events) that cannot be anticipated.

e. We can say that excellences are destroyed by excess and defect and preserved by the mean.
   (1) Excellences of the body are destroyed by excess and defect and preserved by the mean
      (a) Strength destroyed by excess and defect of exercise [and preserved by the right amount]
      (b) Health destroyed by excess and defect of food [and preserved by the right amount]
(2) To gain light on imperceptible things, we must use the evidence of sensible things.

(3) So with the soul
   (a) Courage is destroyed by excess and defect of aggression (?) [and preserved by the right amount]
   (b) Temperance is destroyed by excess and defect of indulgence [and preserved by the right amount.

f. Reiteration that good and bad states both produce and arise from respectively good and bad activities, both in the body and in the soul.

3. Chapter 3--Excellence is the state of tending to feel and avoid pains and to feel and pursue pleasures in such a way (not too much of either) as to be inclined to act in accordance with the right rule. (Query: is this the actual definition of moral excellence? I think so.)
   a. The pleasures and pains that supervene on acts are signs of states: [those who are pained when acting rightly are in a state of vice (a "vicious" state) opposed to virtue either as excess or defect--for instance,] he who is pained at abstaining from bodily pleasure is intemperate, and he who is pained at standing his ground is a coward. (This is just cited as a general observation.)
   (1) Comment: Hence we should have been brought up from youth, as Plato says, to feel pleasure and pain at the right things.
   (2) Confirming argument: Excellences are concerned with passions, and passions are accompanied by pleasures and pains. So excellences are concerned with pleasures and pains. (syllogistic form?)
   (3) Confirming argument: Punishment is a kind of cure (restoration of moral excellence). Punishment is effected by pain. [Therefore [[pleasure and]] pain pertain to moral excellence.]
   b. (Explanation of facts observed under (a):

Every state of soul has a nature relative to
the sort of thing that will make it better or worse. (Perhaps this means just that every state has certain things by which it is bettered and certain things by which it is worsened. An analogy for a bodily state, as asserted earlier, would be that health is improved by eating the right amount, and worsened by eating either too much or too little.) But it is because of pleasures and pains that people become bad, by pursuing and avoiding either the ones they ought not, or at the time they ought not, or in the way they ought not, etc. [Therefore each state has a nature relative to these correct and incorrect pursuits and avoidances of pleasures and pains. (I. e, an excellence has certain patterns of this kind of behavior by which it will be destroyed, and a vice (Gk. kakia) (the opposite of excellence) has certain patterns by which it will be improved (altered in the direction of excellence). It follows from this that the best state is that which tends to pursue pleasures and avoid pains in the best way. (Is this a definition?)]

(1) Confirming argument: There are three objects of choice or avoidance -- the noble, the advantageous, and the pleasant, and their opposites, the base, the disadvantageous, and the painful. The good person tends to go right with all of them, and the bad person wrong. [Thus, going right in relation to the noble or the advantageous tends to correlate with going right in relation to pleasure.]

(2) Confirming argument: From infancy we measure our actions by pleasure and pain.

(3) Confirming argument: It is hard to
resist pleasure, and excellence is concerned with what is hard (the harder the more excellent)—therefore excellence is concerned with resisting pleasure.

4. Summary:
   (a) Excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains.
   (b) Excellence is increased and destroyed by the same things done in different ways (for example, aggressing or indulging either too much or too little.)
   (c) Excellence actualizes itself in the type of actions that brought it about, and likewise for vice.
   (d) NOTE: This is a summary of Book II so far.

5. NOTE: This chapter is confusing. Perhaps what he is saying is this: In our animal nature, if we resist pleasure we feel pain and if we endure pain we also feel pain. But if we are habituated to resist pleasure or endure pain for the sake of the good (the noble or the advantageous), then we come to feel less pain and even to experience pleasure at the right kind of pleasure-resisting and pain enduring. This is moral excellence.

4. Chapter 4--There is no contradiction in saying that we become excellent by doing excellent things, because an excellent person must not only do excellent things, but do them excellently.
   a. It seems paradoxical that a person becomes just by doing just acts, etc., for must not a person who does just acts already be just?
   b. Answer.
   (1) Even with the arts, there is a difference between doing something
correct (e. g., grammatical) by accident and doing it from knowledge--i.e., grammatically.

(a) A difference in these cases is that whereas the difference between merely doing the grammatical and doing the grammatical grammatically is doing the grammatical through knowledge, the difference between merely doing the just and doing the just justly consists of
   i) having knowledge of the just
   ii) choosing the just act
   iii) choosing it because it is just
   iv) choosing it as the result of a firm and unchangeable character.

(2) Just acts are such as the just man would do, but the just man must not only do just acts, but do them justly.

(3) Comment: most people wrongly think that they can become good merely through studying philosophy.

(4) NOTE: This chapter dissolves the seeming vicious circle entailed by saying that we become morally excellent only by performing excellent acts.

5. Chapter 5--Of the three kinds of thing in the soul--passions, faculties, and states, excellences and vices can only be states.

a. There are only three kinds of thing in the soul--passions, faculties, and states.

(1) Passions are feelings accompanied by pleasure and pain
   (a) Examples:
      i) appetite
      ii) anger
      iii) fear
iv) confidence
v) envy
vi) joy
vii) love
viii) hatred
ix) longing
x) emulation (?)
xi) pity

(2) Faculties are that in virtue of which we are able to feel passions.

(3) States are that in virtue or which we stand well or badly with reference to the passions.
   (a) Example: with reference to anger, we stand badly if we feel it violently or too weakly, but well if we feel it moderately.

b. Excellences and vices are not passions. Arguments:
   (1) We are not called good or bad on the ground of our passions, but we are called good or bad on the ground of excellences and vices.
   (2) We are not praised or blamed for our passions, but we are praised or blamed for our excellences and vices.
      (a) Example: We are not praised or blamed for feeling anger, but for feeling it in a certain way.
   (3) The passions do not involve choice, but the excellences and vices do involve choice.
   (4) In respect to the passions we are said to be moved, but not in respect to excellences and vices.

c. Excellences and vices are not faculties. Argument:
   (1) We are not called good or bad on the ground of our faculties, but, etc.
   (2) ETC. Seemingly all the arguments that went through for passions also go through for faculties.
   (3) Reference to earlier arguments to the same effect.
d. Therefore (by disjunctive syllogism, seemly) excellences and vices are states.

6. Chapter 6--Excellence is not an arithmetic mean, nor can it be the mean of a mean.

a. Every excellence makes both the condition and the work of a thing good. Examples:
   (1) Eye--seeing.
   (2) Horse--running, carrying its rider, awaiting the attack of the enemy.

b. Making clearer how this happens
   (1) In anything continuous and divisible it is possible to take more, less, or an equal amount [to some standard--i. e., a mean].
   (2) Conceptual distinction between two kinds of means.
      (a) Mean relative to object: arithmetic mean between extremes
      (b) Mean relative to us.
         i) Examples: the right amount of food for an athlete's present condition. ?, running, wrestling.
   (3) Any art uses such a mean as a standard. NOTE: An art as opposed to a science has to do with practice or production, and thus must take into account accidental circumstances.
   (4) Excellence, like nature, is more exact and better than any art. (Why? because it is more complete good?)
   (5) So excellence too uses the intermediate as a standard.
   (6) The way this is so: in actions and passions there is defect, excess, and intermediate, which is feeling or acting
      (a) at the right times,
      (b) with reference to the right objects,
      (c) towards the right people,
      (d) with the right aim,
(e) in the right way.

(7) Confirmatory:
(a) There are many ways to fail, but only one way to succeed.
(b) Many ways to be bad, but only one way to be good.

c. Summary of moral excellence so far: Excellence is
   (1) a state
   (2) concerned with choice [because it is a standard to be aimed at?]
   (3) lying in a mean relative to us
   (4) the mean being determined by right reason and the way the man of practical wisdom would determine it.

d. Another conceptual clarification: For some actions and passions there are no means because they are already extremes.
(1) Examples:
   (a) passions
      i) spite
      ii) shamelessness
      iii) envy
   (b) actions
      i) adultery
      ii) theft
      iii) murder
   (c) States
      i) temperance
      ii) courage
(2) Otherwise, it would be possible to have a excess, defect, and mean, of an excess, defect, or a mean. (Perhaps the reason this is supposed to be absurd is because it would be the quantity of a quantity.)

7. Chapter 7--Classification of excellences and vices according to spheres of passion and action.
a. [Ordinary] passions [and the actions they
motivate] as spheres and the deficiencies, excellences, and excesses in those spheres:
(1) fear and confidence: cowardice, courage, rashness
(2) pain and pleasure (some of them—perhaps those involving bodily desires): "insensibility", temperance, self-indulgence (Gk?)
(3) giving and taking of small sums of money (inclination to these acts?); meanness, liberality, prodigality
(4) giving and taking of large sums of money: niggardliness, magnificence, vulgarity
(5) feelings concerning honor and dishonor: undue humility, proper pride, empty vanity
(6) feelings concerning small honors and dishonors: nameless, nameless, ambition
(7) anger: inirascibility, good temper, irascibility

b. Spheres relating to intercourse in words and actions [how is this different from previous set of spheres? Answer: it has to do specifically with "intercourse" (Gk: koinonia?...]
(1) concerned with truth
   (a) passion?: mock-modesty,
   truthfulness, boastfulness
(2) concerned with pleasantness
   (a) of the sort involved in giving amusement: boorishness, ready-wittedness, buffoonery
   (b) pleasantness in general
      i) with an end in view: quarrelsomeness, friendliness, flattery
      ii) in general: quarrelsomeness, friendliness, obsequiousness
c. Spheres relating to passions concerning the passions. [I'm not sure I understand the definition of this sphere and how the sub-spheres fall under it.]

(1) shame: shameless, modest, bashful
(2) feelings about the fortunes of others: envy, righteous indignation, spite [pain at the good fortune of others, pain at the undeserved good fortune of others, pleasure at the bad fortune of others--this seems incorrect, for the object of the feeling is itself opposite for the two extremes, which is not so for the other cases--is it? It seems to me that envy and spite should be on the same side and on the other should be saintliness or self-sacrifice]

8. Chapter 8--Relations among excellences and vices

a. Deficiency, mean, and excess are all opposites of each other.

(1) Extremes are contrary both to intermediate and to each other, by analogy with equal, greater, and less.

(2) Intermediates are contrary both to deficiency and excess, for they are excessive in comparison to defect and defective in comparison to excess, both in passions and actions.

(a) Examples: the brave man appears rash relatively to the coward, and appears rash to the cowardly.

b. The greatest contrariety is between the extremes,

(1) by analogy with equal, greater, and less,

(2) and because the intermediate can have a certain likeness to one of the extremes, but the extremes are most unlike each other.

c. Sometimes one of the extremes is more opposed to the mean than is the other. Examples: courage is more opposed to cowardice than to rashness, temperance is
more opposed to self-indulgence than to insensibility. This can be true either
(1) on the part of the thing itself (kath' hauto?)
(2) on our part--the extreme to which we are naturally drawn is more opposed to the mean from our viewpoint than the other extreme.

9. Chapter 9--How to approach aiming at moral excellence.
   a. Summary--moral excellence is a mean between two vices, the one involving excess, the other deficiency, because it aims at what is intermediate in passions and actions.
   b. Moral excellence is not easy, for it is not easy to find the middle--the passions and actions are easy, but not to do to the right person, to the right extent, etc.
   c. To aim at the middle we must first depart from that which is most opposed to it.
   d. Pleasure is the thing most to be guarded against.
   e. Small departures from the mean are not blameworthy; large ones are, but the difference (between small and large departures) can be discerned, like all sensibles, only by sense-perception.