Welcome back to our second lecture on Aristotle and virtue in the human good. We’ve said that Aristotle believes that an excellent or flourishing human life consists of rational thought and behavior. If you remember from last time, what’s distinctive about human beings is our capacity to think and behave in a rational way. And the question how — that now faces us is, well, what exactly is rational thought and behavior? What does rational thought and behavior consist of? And to answer this question, we’re gonna need to know a lot more about what Aristotle means by the word — when he uses the word *rational* and more generally how Aristotle understands reason, how Aristotle understands this distinctive aspect of human nature wherein lies the human good.

In order to do this, we’re going to have to talk a little bit about Aristotle’s picture of the human soul. Because in his diagram — and he doesn’t actually give a diagram, but when I teach this in class I tend to employ a circle that I then divide into parts, each of which indicates a different part of the soul as Aristotle understands it. In a sense, what he provides is a map of the human soul. In providing that map, we can see a) how he conceives of reason, how he conceives of the rational aspect of the human character, and b) what the relationship is between that rational aspect of human nature and our capacities to think and to act.

So we’re gonna spend this lecture talking about Aristotle’s conception of the human soul. A word like *soul* is again a difficult one because it has so many connotations and because it has specific meanings to us today, especially if we belong to certain religious traditions which have robust conceptions of the soul. And so what I
want to do is I want us to treat soul as a theoretical term just as we treated happiness as a theoretical term. Because again happiness is another sort of word that if we apply our modern sense of the word to Aristotle, we’re going to misread him. Likewise, if we apply our ordinary conception of soul or the conception of soul that we derive from our religious traditions to Aristotle, we may also very likely misread him.

And so I want to make sure that we treat soul as a theoretical term and so I'm going to give sort of a definition of it. Aristotle, when he uses the word soul, means something very much like what we mean when we use the word mind. For Aristotle, the soul is the seat or the engine of both thought and activity. So if you can think of this metaphor of both the way we think of the mind and the way that you might think of an engine, let’s see, in a machine or in a car and combine these notions together, this is what Aristotle understands by the human soul. It is the principle engine that drives the movements of the body and of the mind, if you want to think about it that way. And thus the soul is responsible for everything, ranging from autonomic body functions to higher order contemplative thinking and everything in-between.

Now, Aristotle’s conception of the soul is complex and I don’t mean that that means it’s complicated. On his view the human soul has several parts. It’s not a single entity or a single whole. It’s a complex made of subcomponents and each of these components of the soul has its own distinctive function, and thus, thinking as Aristotle thinks, has its own distinctive form of excellence, its own distinctive good. Just like the parts of your body have their own distinctive functions and thus their own distinctive forms of excellence or distinctive goods, so the parts of the soul have
distinctive functions and their own distinctive goods.

We'll see that those parts of the human soul which are unique to human beings, the rational parts — all right. So in this overall diagram of the soul that we're gonna paint, part of that is what I'm gonna call the rational soul. Aristotle is gonna say that there are two distinctive forms of reason, there are two distinctive types of rationality, both of which are unique to human beings and thus both of which we can excel with respect to.

Thus, there are going to be for Aristotle two distinctively human forms of excellence. When we talk about eudymonia being the good life or the flourishing life or the excellent life or the praiseworthy life, whichever one you like, for Aristotle eudymonia is a binary notion. That is, it has two manifestations. There are two ways in which human beings can flourish. And these two ways in which human beings can flourish correspond to the two parts of reason or the two versions or the two manifestations of reason. All of this will become clearer as we go into detail.

Aristotle offers this basic map or description of the human soul on pages 21 to 22 of your reading. All the selections that I'm going to read from today are going to be from those two pages. If you will, let's imagine a circle and this is simply going to be our diagram of the human soul. So let's take a circle and say this circle represents the human soul as Aristotle understands it. Now, let's make a preliminary division. So we divide the circle in two. And let's label one-half of the circle the non-rational soul and the other half of the circle the rational soul. We're gonna do the non-rational first and the rational second. All right. So you've got a circle that represents the whole of the
human soul. Our initial and most fundamental division is between the non-rational parts of the soul and the rational parts of the soul. I will simply call them the non-rational soul and the rational soul.

The non-rational soul is responsible for involuntary and voluntary physical movement and so everything from autonomic body functions to deliberate, willful action are sort of driven or the engine for which is the non-rational soul. The rational soul is responsible for thinking, for every form of mental activity that we can think of, from practical deliberation all the way up to the highest forms of theoretical and philosophic speculation. These are all forms of thinking or, as we might want to call it, mental activity and these are all driven by the rational part of the soul. So the non-rational soul is responsible for involuntary and voluntary physical movement and the rational soul is responsible for thinking. Okay.

Now, let’s focus on the first of these two divisions, the non-rational soul, and let’s divide it further into two more parts. I’m going to give each of these parts a name. Incidentally, the names that I’m giving are descriptive. They are not necessarily the names that Aristotle gives. Although where it’s possible, I will try to use the same terminology that Aristotle uses so that as you read him these things will strike you as familiar. But many of the labels I’m going to give are my own labels and they are merely descriptive. They are intended to help you to remember and to understand these different parts of the soul as Aristotle describes it.

So we’re talking about — we’re describing two divisions of the non-rational soul that I’m going to label as the vegetative soul and the volitional soul. So one part of the
non-rational soul we’re gonna refer to as vegetative. The other part we’re gonna refer to as volitional. Let’s talk about each one.

What I’m calling the vegetative soul is the part of the non-rational soul that Aristotle says is responsible for involuntary autonomic function. So, for example, functions such as digestion, excretion, respiration, blood circulation, etc. — the sorts of functions that we know today are controlled by the medulla or the back region of the brain. I think it’s the medulla. The last time I took biology was probably in high school.

So you have a part of the non-rational soul, a part of this overall engine of a human being that is responsible for involuntary physical movement, for all those bodily functions that you don’t consciously control. They just sort of work on their own. Now, of course, having a function this part of the soul can be excellent or not excellent, can function excellently or non-excellently, and thus it has its own distinctive good.

But we must realize immediately that excellence in these kinds of functions -- excellence in respiration, excellence in digestion, excellence in excretion — are not distinctively human forms of excellence. Every living creature in Aristotle’s view has a vegetative soul. Every living creature from a blade of grass all the way up to a human being with everything in-between has at least a vegetative soul. The vegetative soul is what defines and is the basic principle of life at its most basic fundamental level.

And so excellence in vegetative functions are not distinctively human excellences. They’re excellences common to all living things. And so just the vegetative portion of the non-rational soul is not going to figure at all in our discussion of the human good because there’s nothing distinctively human about its functions or
about its forms of excellence. Being an excellent breather is no different — doesn’t distinguish a human being from a cow or from a tree.

Now, the second part of the non-rational soul I’m calling the volitional soul. I might regret calling it that at some — as I’m thinking about it, it seems sort of a horrible name. I call it that because of the word *volition*. This is the part of the non-rational soul which is responsible for voluntary movement. When you engage in deliberate physical activity that is premeditated, thought out, directed willful activity, that activity is caused by and under the jurisdiction of the volitional soul.

So if you want a different — sort of highlight this difference, think about the difference between two at least perceptibly identical physical movements. Imagine that, on the one hand, a muscle spasm which causes my hand to shoot up like this. Consider on the other hand a student sitting in a class going like this in order to ask a question. The first example is simply an involuntary movement and it is engineered by the vegetative soul. The second, however, is a deliberate movement. The movement is the manifestation or product, the physical product, of my intention: my intention to raise a question, to ask a question, and my belief that by raising my hand I am signaling that I want to ask a question.

That second type of physical movement, being voluntary, deliberate, is within the jurisdiction of the volitional soul. The volitional soul is the seat of appetite and desire. If you think about it, the proximate cause of all action, all deliberate activity, is appetite and desire. The reason you raise your hand is because you want something. The reason you walk across the room is because you want something.
open a bottle of water and drink it is because you want something. Appetite and desire are the proximate causes of all action. These are the most fundamental volitions.

Okay. Now, here’s where things start to get interesting. Aristotle argues that all animals, all higher animals, have a volitional soul. That is, any creature that’s capable of voluntary movement of which monkeys, dogs, dolphins, cats are all examples. Once you start getting to the more primitive rudimentary life forms, it becomes increasingly questionable whether there is any volitional movement at all as opposed to simply purely autonomic movement, involuntary movement. But certainly with the higher animals there’s very little controversy that they act as a result of cognitions, as a result of desires. And, in this sense, they act as a result of sort of primitive sorts of volitions. Of course, they don’t have volitions in the way that human beings do, but they have a primitive sort of volition.

So Aristotle says, look. All higher animals — all animals capable of deliberate activity have this type of soul and so excellence in volition in and of itself is not a distinctively human form of excellence. So excellence in mere physical activity, excellence in walking across a room, excellence in making a salutation, excellence in scratching yourself — these are not distinctively human excellences. These are simply fulfillments of desires and appetites which any higher animal is capable of.

But here’s where things get interesting, as I said before. Unlike the vegetative soul, the volitional soul can be brought under the eye of reason. In other words, your desires and appetites and actions that they engender can be supervised by and directed by or redirected by your thought, your higher thoughts, your reasoning.
Human beings are capable of deliberation. We are capable of inquiring, saying to ourselves “Hmmm. This is what I want. Ought I to do this now?” Or should I do something else? Or should I do nothing at all? And when we do this, we are bringing our volitions and the actions that they engender under the supervision and the control of reason.

Now, when the volitional soul is exercised excellently under the jurisdiction of reason, that is a distinctively human form of excellent. The excellent application of reason to volition resulting in a certain kind of action, a certain kind of rational action, is a distinctively human capacity and thus excellence with respect to it is a distinctly human form of excellence. In fact — and I guess we could call this a punch line — in fact, it is precisely excellence in the application of reason to volition and action that we generally refer to as moral virtue. The morally virtuous person is, in the minimal sense, the person who recognizes what he or she ought to do or not to do and acts accordingly. And Aristotle understands this moral virtue as consisting of the successful application of reason to volition and to action.

Let’s take a look for a minute at the text where Aristotle talks about this. It’s very compact. If you recall, when I introduced Aristotle and we first started talking about him, I said to you that we don’t actually have any of his writings — that is, things that he wrote to be books. We have none of those in our possession. What we have are texts which bear his name which consists of edited lectures. And so a lot of the reason why some of these very expansive, deep points are presented so compactly in the text is because undoubtedly the text consists of lecture notes upon which Aristotle in an
actual lecture context would’ve probably expanded upon substantially. Would’ve
ad-libbed, would’ve improvised, and so on and so forth. Unlike a textbook, it’s very
clear that a book like the Nicomachean ethics is in a sense an outline. And so hence
the compactness and the sparseness sometimes of detail. Because one can assume
that if these were lecture notes, that Aristotle would’ve expanded substantially upon his
remarks, upon his written remarks, in the course of an actual lecture.

But let’s go to the text because on this it’s really quite clear. Page 22, second
paragraph. He’s talking about the non-rational soul. He says, quote, “So the element
without reason seems itself to have two parts, for the vegetative part has no share at all
in reason.” So your autonomic functions, your breathing, your respiration, your
digestion, your excretion, your — you know, when you sweat, these are not things that
can be brought under the jurisdiction of reason. It’s nonsensical to speak of the
rational — the rational surveillance and direction of digestion. That’s why he says,
“The vegetative part has no share at all in reason.”

But he then goes on to say, “The part consisting in appetite and desire in general
does share in it, in reason, in a way insofar as it listens to and obeys it. It has reason in
the sense that a person who listens to the reason of his father and his friends is said to
have reason.” He’s thinking of the rational soul with respect to the volitional as sort of
like an advisor, a wiser, smarter advisor. So just like you as an immature person might
turn to an adult for advice as to how to act, so the volitional soul, the seed of appetite,
turns to the rational soul for advice on which volitions to follow, which not to follow,
which volitions perhaps to sublimate, which volitions to defy, all with an eye to choosing
to do the right thing.

He goes on to say that the element without reason is in some way persuaded by reason, is indicated as well by the offering of advice and all kinds of criticism and encouragement. Again, he’s treating reason as a kind of expert, as a kind of wiser person, speaking to that appetite and that desire and saying, “Well, this is fine and you can go ahead and follow this, but this desire probably isn’t appropriate in this context and you might want to hold off on that or you might want to sublimate that desire, redirect it into some other form of activity that’s more acceptable,” so on and so forth.

So this brings us to the rational soul. We’ve now explored the two divisions of the non-rational soul. Let’s now look at the divisions of the rational soul. And first — and the rational soul, incidentally, is also divided into two parts. There’s this lovely symmetry, right? The whole human soul is like a circle. It’s divided into two fundamental divisions, non-rational and rational. The non-rational is further divided into two divisions, the vegetative part which sort of operates on its own and the volitional part which can operate on its own, but in a creature with reason can be brought under the jurisdiction of the rational part. Now we turn to the rational soul. It is divided into two parts. The first part we’re going to look at is that part of the rational soul whose job is to survey and provide guidance to the volitions. That part of the rational soul is called practical reason.

Practical reason is the seat of deliberation. If we’re thinking of the soul as a kind of engine, an engine of activity of both mental and physical activity, practical reason — that part of the rational soul is the seat of deliberation. It is where deliberation goes on.
What is deliberation? Deliberation is thought over action. When we deliberate, we are deciding what to do and what not to do. So in deliberation we have practical reason, surveying the volitions and their intended consequences, their intended actions, and making judgments about which of those volitions ought to be followed, which ought to be rejected, which ought to be sublimated or redirected. Sublimation means redirect. Like to sublimate a desire is to redirect it from its predictable object to another object.

And so the object of practical reason is action. It is reasoning about ends and means, about what ought to be done and how it ought to be done. This capacity — this facility for deliberation, incidentally, is not only relevant in the moral sphere. Practical reasoning doesn’t only go on with respect to those ranges of actions that have moral implications. Practical reasoning is also involved in every practical endeavor. For example, in engineering. In the craftsmanship of every kind there is — are seeped in practical reasoning. The craftsman, the engineer, these are all professionals for whom practical reasoning is the chief attribute as well as, obviously, skill. But skill is, in a sense, a kind of excellence in practical reasoning.

Aristotle persistently likens the acquisition of moral virtue to the acquisition of excellences in craft. We’ll talk about that later when we talk about how Aristotle thinks moral virtues are acquired. But both in craftsmanship and in the domain of moral activity, practical reason is the primary faculty that’s involved.

But we’re interested in the moral case. We’re interested in those range of activities which have moral implications. And in this context, excellence in practical reasoning breaks down to identifying the right thing, knowing what the right thing to do
is, and when applied to volitions, like the successful application of practical reason to volition, consists of choosing to do what practical reason recommends. This combination of excellences — the excellence in practical reasoning taken by itself, it is the identification of the right thing to do and the choice on the part of the volitional soul to follow what practical reason recommends — this combination of excellences is what Aristotle calls moral virtue.

And I think and I want to suggest to you that this is quite a good analysis of moral virtue as we ordinarily understand it. But surely, however we think of moral virtue, at its most fundamental it consists in at least two things, right? The ability to identify what the right thing to do is in a given set of circumstances and following through, the capacity to actually redirect, if necessary, our actual volitions so that we will choose to do the right thing. So identifying the right thing, choosing to do the right thing, these are surely the most fundamental building blocks of moral virtue and these are the result of the intersection of the activities of two functions of the soul: the activity of the volitional soul and the activity of practical reason.

So you want to think about this and I’m repeating this because this is sort of difficult, but at the same time it’s essential. I’m hoping that the more ways I put this, the more likely that more of you will grasp what we’re getting at. Think of the volitions by themselves as blind strivings towards their object. So appetite and desire taken by themselves — that is, without any guidance of reason, without any deliberation — appetite and desire taken by themselves are simply blind strivings towards and object.

Practical reason is the faculty by which the right objects are identified. So the
rationalist says, “Ahh. This is what we ought to do in this situation.” The volitions are just blindly striving towards their objects. Practical reason identifies the right object. And then, in a sense, a silent negotiation takes place. Practical reason speaks to the volitions and says, “This is what I ought to do.” And the volitions, in a morally virtuous person, obey. In a morally vicious person they disobey.

Now, an interesting question arises as to what exactly is the status of the person who fails in practical reason. Is such a person immoral, a person who does not know what the right thing is? Now, typically in today’s — at least in the legal context today, we take the failure, the systematic failure of practical reason, to be exculpatory. That’s called the insanity defense. What the chief hallmark of the insanity defense is the inability to distinguish or recognize right and wrong. In the terms that we’re presenting here, what we’re talking about is that would consist of a systematic failure of practical reason, an incapacity to identify the right thing or to distinguish the right thing from the wrong thing.

It is the human capacity for deliberation over and choice of action that renders us subject to moral assessment. The reason why you don’t hold a dog morally responsible for things it does, even though its actions are deliberate and volitional, is because the animal lacks practical reason. It lacks the capacity to deliberate over its volitions and their corresponding actions and to make the right choices. Actions become candidates for moral assessment when they are under the jurisdiction of a rational soul. A rational person who is capable of deliberating over their actions, identifying right and wrong and making appropriate or inappropriate choices, that person
becomes subject — that sort of creature is subject to moral assessment.

Okay. Let’s talk about the last component of the last part of the soul, the second part of the rational soul. This part Aristotle refers to alternatively. I’m gonna give three different names for this because he throughout the book employs three different names. He may employ more, for all I know, but these are the central names he employs: theoretical reason, philosophic reason, scientific reason. Again, these are not three different forms of reason; these are three names that he gives for this second part of the rational soul.

Unlike practical reason, the object of philosophic or scientific, theoretical, the object — and I’m just gonna from now on just to save us all a headache, I’m gonna call it theoretical reason. So unlike practical reason, the job of theoretical reason is to seek the truth. The object of theoretical reason is not action. Like the object of practical reason is activity, the object of theoretical reason is truth. The successful application of theoretical reason. So excellence in theoretical reasoning produces knowledge. If you think about it, the product of excellence in practical reasoning is moral virtue. The product of excellence in theoretical reasoning is knowledge. Knowledge of science, knowledge of mathematics, knowledge of philosophy, knowledge of every kind.

True justified beliefs, as we’ve been calling knowledge throughout this — true justified beliefs are the result, the product, of excellent theoretical reasoning. This, too, is a distinctly human form of excellence. Only human beings have theoretical reason. Thus, only human beings have the capacity to obtain knowledge. Thus, the obtaining of knowledge, this form of excellence, is a distinctly human form of excellence.
Aristotle calls it the contemplative life. The life spent in the pursuit of knowledge Aristotle refers to as the contemplative life and this is to be distinguished from the moral life. The life of moral and civic virtue, the life of excellence in activity, excellence in deliberate, rational activity. The contemplative life consists of excellence in the pursuit of the truth, excellence in the acquisition of knowledge. They are both distinctively human forms of excellence. Both the life of moral and civic virtue and the life of contemplation are forms of eudemonic.

What's left is to discuss and analyze each of these forms of life in more detail. Okay. We now know that the life of moral and civic virtue is one form of human excellence. We know that it consists of the successful application of reason to volition and to action. Now we want to ask what constitutes a successful application of reason to volition and action. That will be the analysis of moral virtue.

We also know that the life of contemplation is another form of eudemonic, another form of human excellence. We know that it consists of the excellent application of theoretical reason to the truth. Now we need to ask the question: what constitutes excellent application of theoretical reasoning to the truth? Thus will be our analysis of the contemplative life.

And so in our next and final lecture we will offer an analysis of the moral and civic life, an analysis of the contemplative life, and a brief discussion of how these excellences are acquired. How do we become morally virtuous? How do we become knowledgeable? How do we become contemplators? That will bring us into our third lecture on Aristotle and will complete the lectures on Aristotle.
And so with that I will leave you with a few things to think about. I’m trying to keep these things to think about as timely with the reading as possible. Sometimes I get a little ahead of myself -- I tell you to think about something that I may not have gotten to you in the lecture — but you should be reading ahead of me. You will get the most out of this if you read ahead of me, then listen to the lecture, and then double back and reread. Everything should be read twice in order to really grasp this stuff properly.

So here’s the next range of things to think about. The first: can you explain why Aristotle believes that embodiment and activity are essential to moral virtue? This is something you should already be able to answer. You won’t be able to answer it by looking it up. It’s not going to be written in black and white. You’re going to have to reason your way to the answer, but you have all the necessary ingredients in order to reason your way to the answer.

Second question has two parts. Can you explain why the contemplative life for Aristotle is both a) the life of a god and b) an amoral life? Now, let’s be careful. I didn’t say an immoral life. I said an amoral life. That is, a life that is neither good nor evil, neither virtuous nor vicious. Why does Aristotle think the contemplative life is both the life of the gods and an amoral life? What do you think of this? What do you think of his analysis of the contemplative life?

Those are the things I want you to think about and we will return next time to finish our discussions of Aristotle, specifically an analysis of the moral life and of the contemplative life. Thank you very much.