

Hobbes on Aristotle's Ethics

1 Aristotle's definition of virtue

Compare this with *Leviathan* 15.40: the “writers of moral philosophy” place the knowledge of virtue in “a mediocrity of passions”.

Excellence [virtue] is a state concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us, this being determined by reason and in the way in which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while excellence both finds and chooses that which is intermediate. (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II.6 1106b36-1107a5)

2 Subjective vs. objective?

Here's a common interpretation. Aristotle believed there was an objective good, given by human nature. Human beings strive to perfect themselves, if they are able, by realizing this nature. (That's why they form cities, among other things). Hobbes denied that there is an objective good. He held that the good is subjective in that it depends on what individuals want. For example:

But whatsoever is the object of any man's appetite or desire, that is it which he for his part calleth *good*: and the object of his hate and aversion, *evil*; and of his contempt, *vile* and *inconsiderable*. For these words of good, evil, and contemptible, are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: there being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common rule of good and evil, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves; but from the person of the man (where there is no commonwealth;) or, (in a commonwealth,) from the person that representeth it; or from an arbitrator or judge, whom men disagreeing shall by consent set up, and make his sentence the rule thereof. (*Leviathan* 6.7)

Here's a version of this interpretation.

In Chapter XI of *De Homine*, when he [Hobbes] speaks of the profusion of desires that continue throughout one's lifetime, he contends, in opposition to Aristotle, that "one cannot speak of something as being *simply good*, since whatsoever is good, is good for someone or other". ... Therefore good is said to be relative to person, place, and time. (Hampton, *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition*, [Cambridge University Press, 1986] p. 29.)

2.1 But is it true?

Aristotle, and other heathen philosophers define good and evil, by the appetite of men; *and well enough*, as long as we consider them governed every one by his own law: For in the condition of men that have no other law but their own appetites, there can be no general rule of good, and evil actions. But in a commonwealth this measure is false: not the appetite of private men, but the law, which is the will and appetite of the state is the measure. (*Leviathan* 46.32, emphasis added)

The common name for all things that are desired, insofar as they are desired, is *good*; and for all things we shun, *evil*. Therefore *Aristotle hath well defined good* as that which all men desire. But, since different men desire and shun different things, there must needs be many things that are good to some and evil to others; so that which is *good* to us is *evil* to our enemies.... There can be a common *good*, and it can rightly be said of something, *it is commonly a good*, that is, useful to many, or good for the state. At times, one can also talk of a good for everyone, like health: but this way of speaking is relative; therefore one cannot speak of something as being *simply good*, since whatsoever is good, is good for someone or other. (*De Homine* XI.4, available in translation in *Man and Citizen*, ed. B. Gert, Hackett Publishing, emphasis added.)