

SAMPLE In-Class Exercise and Writing Assignment: Aristotle's argument for the highest good

Synopsis

Time to complete: 2 hours in-class.

Goals: (1) to guide investigation and discussion of the focus text; (2) to prepare students to write their own analysis of a different focus passage.

One of the biggest stumbling blocks to student comprehension of texts is lack of experience with breaking complex arguments and ideas into smaller parts. The worksheet on pages 2-4 of this document is designed to draw students into the practice of philosophical analysis by showing them how an analysis can be developed in stages. I had students complete the worksheet in class and used it to facilitate a class discussion of the first two chapters of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* I (in an introductory course on Ancient Philosophy).

Each section of the worksheet asks students to complete a discrete task: identifying and summarizing key claims, identifying premises, identifying support for premises, etc. In some cases, I have provided a list of claims to choose from, rather than asking students to find those claims directly in the text. Providing this kind of guidance keeps the exercise to a suitable length for in-class completion. It also provides a built-in focus for the discussion by allowing me to select some claims that are misleading or wrong in interesting ways.

The final page of this document contains a short writing assignment that builds off of the in-class exercise. Students are asked to write a 3-4 page paper that answers a set of questions similar to the ones discussed in class, but about a different passage from Aristotle.

HANDOUT for 3.4

Aristotle thinks that there's a "best" or "highest" good and that everyone is trying to get it.

Our goal: Figure out why he thinks this.

Part 1: Gathering info

- List the main claims of NE I.1 below. Don't leave anything important out. But also be sure to use your own words as much as possible.

Part 2: Looking for a place to begin

- Of the following claims (from NE I.1-2), which seems like a good **first premise** for an argument for the conclusion that the best good exists?
 - (1) If there is an end of things doable in action that we wish for because of itself, and the others because of *it*, and we do not choose everything because of something else, it is clear that this will be the good—that is, the best good.
 - (2) Hence regarding our life as well, won't knowing the good have great influence and—like archers with a target—won't we be better able to hit what we should?
 - (3) [The best good belongs to the science] with the most control, and the most architectonic one. And politics seems to be like this, since it is the one that prescribes which of the sciences need to exist in cities and which ones each group in cities should learn and up to what point.

Part 3: Attempting a reconstruction

- Using (1) from Part 2 as your first premise, list the other premises Aristotle would need in order to get to the conclusion: “Therefore, the best good exists.”

(1) If there is an end of things doable in action that we wish for because of itself, and the others because of *it*, and we do not choose everything because of something else, it is clear that this will be the good—that is, the best good.

(2)

(3)

(4)

(5)

(6) Therefore, the best good exists.

Part 4: Understanding the line of argument

- For each premise of your reconstruction, select the claims below that you think would be relevant to explaining/supporting the premise. Some premises might be supported by more than one relevant claim. Some claims might be relevant to more than one premise. Some claims might not be relevant at all. Be prepared to explain your selections.
 - The most important question to ask yourself: might Aristotle think that this claim supports the *truth* of the premise?
- a. The product of an activity is better than the activity itself.
 - b. It makes no difference whether the ends of the actions are the activities themselves or some other thing beyond them, just as in the sciences we have mentioned.
 - c. One end is better than another if the second end is a means to the first.

- d. If every end is desired for the sake of some further end, desire will be empty and pointless.
- e. And since it [politics] uses the other practical sciences and, furthermore, legislates about what must be done and what avoided, its end will circumscribe those of the others.
- f. Every craft and every method of inquiry and likewise every action and deliberate choice seems to seek some good. That is why they correctly declare that the good is ‘that which all seek’.

Part 4: Criticizing the argument

- Premise 3 is in trouble. Select the answer that you think offers a **strong objection** to Aristotle’s third premise.
- g. We should reject premise 3 because we do not choose everything else for the sake of some one end.
- h. We should not accept premise 3 because Aristotle’s argument for premise 3 is *fallacious*: the fact that everything aims at *some* good doesn’t show that they all aim at *the same good*.
- i. We should not accept premise 3 because Aristotle has not provided any argument for it.
- j. We should not accept premise 3 because Aristotle’s argument for premise 3 is *fallacious*: The fact that there can’t be infinite sequences of desires doesn’t show that all desires aim at *the same end*.
- k. We should reject premise 3 because we don’t actually have free will and so we don’t really make any choices.

Part 5: Examine the alternatives

- Should we conclude that Aristotle does not have a good argument for the existence of the best good? What are our options at this point? What else could be going on?

WRITING ASSIGNMENT 3

Due: by start of class on Monday, June 17

Length: 3-4 pages

Target text: *Nicomachean Ethics* 1097b20-1098a20 (from “But to say that happiness is the best good. . .” to “Nor, similarly, does one day or a short time make someone blessed and happy”). You must write on this argument.

In this passage, Aristotle concludes that “the human good turns out to be activity of the soul in accord with virtue and, if there are more virtues than one, then in accord with the best and most complex” (1098a15).

- **State (in your own words) the main claims Aristotle makes to support this conclusion.**
 - Make sure to include all the main claims and to distinguish any subordinate claims from the main claims.
 - For each claim you discuss, cite the Bekker page number that corresponds to the relevant text.
 - Either at the end of your reconstruction or along the way, discuss how the claims fit together to yield Aristotle’s conclusion.
- **Develop an objection to one of the main claims you discuss.**
 - Identify the claim that you think is problematic.
 - Discuss how you think Aristotle might try to support this claim. (You should do this even if Aristotle doesn’t offer an obvious argument in defense of the claim. Try to step into his shoes.)
 - Explain in detail why you think the claim should be rejected.
- **Discuss the significance of your objection.**
 - If your objection holds, how would this change our understanding of this argument? How might it change our evaluation of the success of Aristotle’s project in the *Nicomachean Ethics*? (In answering these questions, you will want to think about the significance of this argument in the context of Aristotle’s project of identifying the nature of human happiness/the good.)