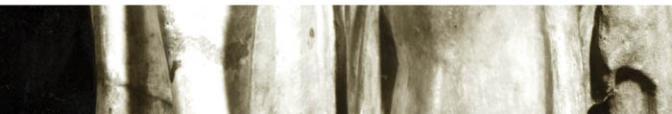


Aristotle

The Nicomachean Ethics

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THE NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

ARISTOTLE (384–322 BC), with Plato one of the two greatest philosophers of antiquity, and in the view of many the greatest philosopher of all time, lived and taught in Athens for most of his career. He began as a pupil of Plato, and for some time acted as tutor to Alexander the Great. He left writings on a prodigious variety of subjects, covering the whole field of knowledge from biology and astronomy to rhetoric and literary criticism, from political theory to the most abstract reaches of philosophy. He wrote two treatises on ethics, called *Eudemian* and *Nicomachean* after their first editors, his pupil Eudemus and his son Nicomachus. *The Nicomachean Ethics* was probably written later, in Aristotle's fifties and sixties, when he was head of the Lyceum, the school he founded in Athens.

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ARISTOTLE

The Nicomachean Ethics



Translated by

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Revised with an Introduction and Notes by

LESLEY BROWN

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INTRODUCTION

ARISTOTLE was the first Western thinker to divide philosophy into branches which are still recognizable today: logic, metaphysics, natural philosophy, philosophy of mind, ethics and politics, rhetoric; he made major contributions in all these fields. He was born in Stagira, a city of northern Greece, in 384 BC. His father Nicomachus was a doctor at the court of Amyntas of Macedon, who preceded Philip, the conqueror of much of Greece. Aristotle later served as tutor to Philip's remarkable son, Alexander the Great.

As a young man Aristotle went to Athens in 367 to study with Plato at his Academy, remaining there until Plato's death in 347. This was a period in which Plato wrote works such as *Timaeus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, and *Philebus*, as well as his *Laws*, and it is intriguing to ask how much these owe to the challenges from his brilliant pupil Aristotle. After a period in Asia Minor (where he may have pursued research for his biological works) and then back in Macedon as tutor, Aristotle returned to Athens and founded his own philosophical school, the Lyceum: some of its remains have been recently discovered in modern Athens. He died in 322 BC, a year after he had to leave Athens in the wake of the death of his former pupil, the emperor Alexander.

Apart from a few fragments of more popular works, the writings that have come down to us are academic treatises, some more, some less polished. They were not published, in any modern sense, and Aristotle may have continued to revise them. The breadth and character of the teaching at the Lyceum can be gauged from the surviving treatises, which cover an immense range, and are always cast in a questioning, argumentative, and non-dogmatic style. It may be that the works as they survive are lecture-notes, and this would indeed account for some of the rougher features. The fact is that we know little about their original form and purpose, the order in which they were written or how they were edited.

Three works on ethics have come down under his name: *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) in ten 'books', *Eudemian Ethics* (EE) in eight 'books', and the so-called *Magna Moralia* or 'great ethics'.¹ The last is probably

¹ A short work, also ascribed to Aristotle, called 'On Virtues and Vices' is undoubtedly by a later author.

not by Aristotle but may be a pupil's record of a lecture course. The titles of the other two are thought to derive from their editors after Aristotle's death: Nicomachus was Aristotle's son, while Eudemus was a pupil. The two works cover many of the same topics, and the relation between them is controversial, with an added puzzle that three books are common to both works: Books V–VII of the *NE* correspond to Books IV–VI of the *EE*. The more common scholarly opinion is that the *Nicomachean Ethics* is the later work, and it has been regarded as Aristotle's major and definitive work on ethics at least since the first or second century AD.² Some parts are more polished than others, and in one of the common books (Book V, on justice) some material seems out of place. Aristotle's writing has a certain terse elegance, and it is ideally suited to the presentation of arguments, in which his philosophy abounds. The work opens with a discussion of happiness, then moves to the moral virtues—the virtues of character—including justice; and to the virtues of the intellect; it discusses pleasure and friendship and its role in the best life, returning to a further discussion of happiness, then a final transition to political theory. Aristotle regards ethics as a branch of politics, and his work *Politics* was designed as a sequel.

Plato, and his teacher Socrates, set the scene for much of Aristotle's philosophizing. Condemned to death in 399 BC, Socrates left no written philosophy and we have to discern his views from Plato's dialogues, as well as from works by Xenophon. Aristotle, who first studied with Plato some forty years after the death of Socrates, credits Socrates with exclusive interest in ethical questions, and attributes some key theses to him: that all the virtues are kinds of knowledge (VI. 13) and that no one acts contrary to what they know (or judge) to be best (VII. 2). The ethical questions discussed by Socrates, and by Plato after him, concern how one should live; what the virtues are, whether they can be taught, and most of all, why they are worth choosing. 'The unexamined life is not worth living,' declares Socrates in his *Apology*—the speech Plato wrote purporting to be his defence at his trial. In it Socrates describes his lifestyle of questioning so-called experts to see if they can defend their beliefs.

Much of Aristotle's philosophy is a reflection on and a response to writings by his predecessors, and he is keen to distance himself from

² Anthony Kenny discusses the issues in *The Aristotelian Ethics* (Oxford 1978), and *Aristotle on the Perfect Life* (Oxford 1992).

their views on metaphysics, natural philosophy, and philosophy of mind. But on the major ethical questions, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle are in agreement—though Aristotle never admits this in so many words. All three agree that the highest good for human beings is happiness, and that a rational choice of life will be one directed to one's own happiness. Only a life in which one cultivates the traditional virtues (justice, temperance, courage, and practical wisdom) will be a happy life. Plato's dialogues had featured Socrates facing some immoralist challenges to the traditional virtues,³ but treatment of sceptical attacks on morality is largely absent from Aristotle's work. His major contributions include an in-depth study of what happiness is, of how the virtues relate to happiness, and of what the different types of virtue—moral and intellectual—are. He questions the prominence Socrates gives to knowledge in the account of moral virtue, but his own considered view gives a key role in moral virtue to *phronēsis*, practical wisdom, and he agrees with Socrates in holding that the moral virtues are essentially united (VI.13). Aristotle challenges his teacher Plato in a famous chapter discussing Plato's Form of the Good (I.6), while admitting that 'the inquiry is an uphill one, since the Forms have been admitted by friends of our own'. Insisting that different subjects of inquiry have different starting points and require different kinds of approach, Aristotle dismisses a so-called universal good, or 'Form' or 'Idea' of good, introduced in Plato's *Republic* as the foundation of the goodness and even of the being of all else. He regards it both as an impossible concept and as anyway irrelevant to ethics, which is a study of the *human* good.

Plato, as well as other predecessors, had explored at length the relation of pleasure to goodness. In one dialogue, *Protagoras*, Plato depicts Socrates defending hedonism, the thesis that pleasure is the good, against the more conventional morality of Protagoras. Aristotle's contribution to the debate was to go much deeper into the question of how we should think of pleasure, and what it is, as well as asking how it is related to the good.⁴ On the question of the place of pleasure in the good life his answer is similar to Plato's in *Republic* and *Philebus*: while pleasure is not the good, the best life will necessarily

³ From Callicles in *Gorgias*, and from Thrasymachus in *Republic* I, discussed below.

⁴ Two treatments of pleasure are found in *NE*, one in VII and one in X. As mentioned above, Book VII is one of the books common to *NE* and *EE*. There are good reasons for thinking that the 'common books' were written originally for the *EE*; this would partly explain the presence in *NE* of two, not fully consistent, discussions of pleasure.

also be the most pleasant, involving those pleasures suited to our nature as rational beings. Similarly Aristotle probes in great depth other concepts central to ethics such as voluntariness, choice, deliberation, and practical reasoning; some of these are discussed in more detail below.

Aristotle's Ethical Theory: Its Key Elements

The Human Good: Happiness

For Aristotle, ethics is the inquiry into the human good. What is the highest of all goods attainable by action? Among everyone—educated and lowly, healthy and sick—he writes) there is verbal agreement: it is happiness, *eudaimonia* (I.4). And they all equate this with doing well or faring well. But what happiness is is a matter of long-standing dispute, we learn, with three ‘lives’ in contention: those of sensual enjoyment, of political achievement, and of intellectual contemplation (I.5). Aristotle adds, but swiftly dismisses, a fourth contender for the best life: the pursuit of wealth. To dismiss it he need only point out that wealth is sought *for something else*. The highest good must be wanted *for itself*; it must consist in *activity* (rather than some *state* a person is in) and must be self-sufficient and lacking in nothing. All this offers confirmation that happiness, which satisfies these conditions, is indeed the highest good. But to get a more informative answer, he invokes the idea that human beings have a function—rational activity—and concludes that happiness is excellent rational activity: in his words, *rational activity in accordance with virtue* (I.7). ‘Function’ translates *ergon*, literally ‘task’ or ‘work’. We return below to the ‘function argument’, and to excellence and virtue.

Already we have found much to surprise a modern reader. Why should ethics be the study of happiness, and not—perhaps—of what I owe to others, or of the criterion of right action? We return to this question below. Defining happiness as outstanding rational activity may seem puzzling to those who assume happiness is a mental state, a state of subjective well-being. To ease the problem, some have suggested that *eudaimonia* should instead be translated ‘flourishing’ or ‘fulfilment’. Clearly by ‘happiness’ Aristotle is not speaking of any kind of mental state, still less of one where subjects’ self-reports are invited and treated as definitive.

In his investigation of happiness, i.e. of the best life for human beings, Aristotle makes various assumptions. The answer will not vary according to an individual's preferences; and people's assessment of their own happiness may be incorrect. Happiness is not to be equated with pleasure, but, for all that, he will (in Book X) solve the ancient question of the relation between pleasure and the highest good by finding that the truly happy life will indeed be the most pleasant, even though the source of its being the highest good is not its pleasantness. Happiness is available only to those whose age, gender, and civic status allow them to pursue a life of the excellent activities that make it up. Children can be called happy only in the sense that their lives promise happiness; the life of slaves precludes happiness, and so—we may perhaps infer—does that of women, though this is left unsaid. Most striking of all, perhaps, is his use of the famous 'function argument'.

Happiness and Human Function: Rational Activity

The 'function argument' is used to find the human good via the human function (I.7). It gets off to a bad start, with examples of function-bearers—flute-players, eyes, hands, or feet—that seem irrelevant. Flute-players are, by their very title, persons whose role it is to play the flute, and nothing seems to follow about a role for human beings, as such. And though we can readily agree that the eye's function is to see, this is because that's the role it plays *in the whole organism*. These parallels will not convince us that human beings have a function. Rather, Aristotle is drawing on a key assumption from his philosophy of nature. There is a way human beings ought to be and ought to live. This is not because god created them for a purpose—something Aristotle did not hold—but simply because they are a certain kind of living being, and every living species has its own work or function. Human beings have many capacities—Aristotle calls them capacities of soul, but by soul he just means that in virtue of which a thing is alive. Some are shared with lower animals; reason is the capacity that sets man apart. So, since the function of a kind of being is what is special, not what is shared, reason is the key to the best human life.

Before investigating rational capacities further, let's pause for some objections. First, why infer what it's *best* that men should do from what they alone *can* do? There are plenty of things only humans, with their rational capacities, can do. Take cheating at cards, devising

weapons of mass destruction, or grooming children for sex-abuse: we don't want to make these part of the best human life. Or again, why exclude from the best life any activities we share with other animals, such as rearing offspring? (This we can answer easily, by recognizing that doing so *using reason* may count as different from merely doing so as an animal does.) Most seriously of all, why insist on a function of human beings *in general*? Surely what is special about human beings is that individuals differ so markedly in their abilities, preferences, and goals.

Some raise a different objection: why should the *good for* a human being consist in doing what a *good person* typically does? They charge Aristotle with conflating the good in the sense of the beneficial (i.e. what's good for humans), with a different, perhaps moral good (i.e. what a good person does), when he declares that the good for an F (a flute-player, a human being) will be what the good F does. But this isn't a real difficulty. In searching for the human good, Aristotle is searching for the good as far as human beings are concerned, not for something *good for* human beings, in the way in which food and water are good for them. And when he speaks of a good human being, he hasn't illicitly smuggled in the notion of a morally good person. A good person, so far, is just a good specimen of a human being, akin to a good oak tree or a good elephant. But then what about moral goodness and the virtues: how do they get into the picture?

Excellent Rational Activity and the Virtues

So far an immoralist such as Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic* could agree with Aristotle's definition of happiness as a life of rational activity in accordance with excellence or virtue (*aretē*). Thrasymachus, in praising a life of injustice, i.e. of exploiting and getting the better of others, called it a virtue and praised it as rational and sensible. So the key questions are: what are reason and rationality, and what counts as exercising them in a way that manifests excellence or virtue? Here we encounter a problem for translation. *Aretē*, usually translated virtue, means excellence of any kind, and can be applied to pruning-hooks as well as to persons. As just noted, Plato's character Thrasymachus can deny justice is a virtue, simply because he does not regard it as an excellent quality to possess. So how does Aristotle justify his selection of virtues—of excellent rational activities?

Reason, as we learn in I.13, features in different ways in the human soul. (When he speaks of the soul, as we saw, Aristotle means simply the capacities of a living thing in so far as it is alive.) One soul-part, the intellect, has reason in the full sense, but the part that has appetites is rational in a secondary way. That is, the appetites are *responsive to reason*, though they are not themselves rational. We may label them semi-rational, though Aristotle doesn't put it this way. As there are two soul-parts, rational in their different ways, so there are two kinds of virtue, the virtues of character—whose locus is the appetites, and virtues of intellect. The moral virtues, or virtues of character, will have the lion's share of the discussion (II–V), while VI discusses those of the intellect, among them the vital link with the moral virtues, practical wisdom. In the account of virtues of character, we find that the traditional virtues of courage, temperance, and justice have soon entered the discussion, although—as we saw—the notion of a morally good person was not already implicit in the definition of happiness. What we look for in vain is an argument that to exercise one's rationality in the best possible way, 'in accordance with excellence', is to have and exercise the traditional moral virtues. Perhaps Aristotle held that such a proof was not possible; and since his audience were to be well-brought-up young men (but not too young!), it wasn't necessary either.

What, in Aristotle's account, is valuable about the virtues, whether they be the virtues of the intellect or the moral virtues, whether self-regarding ones such as temperance, or other-regarding ones such as justice? In his system, what makes them virtues is simply that, by having and exercising them, one is living a life that is the best life for a human being. They contribute intrinsically to a person's *eudaimonia*. (He allows that certain external goods are necessary conditions for *eudaimonia* also, attacking a view—perhaps he took it to be Plato's—that virtue is sufficient.) Contrast this with a consequentialist view whereby human virtues are valuable for *the results* they bring about, for society or one's neighbours or even oneself. I return to this contrast below.

How Moral Virtues are Acquired and How they 'Lie in a Mean'

Aristotle insists that habituation, not teaching, is the route to moral virtue (II.1). We must *practise doing* good actions, not just read about virtue. Though importantly true, this oversimplifies, and soon it

becomes clear that reason too has a role. While the moral virtues are the excellences of the semi-rational soul part containing appetites (including emotions), to be virtues proper, responsiveness to reason is required. In tandem with responsiveness to reason, a virtuous person comes to enjoy doing good actions (II.3), and develops the right feelings (of fear, anger, etc.).

Now we come to Aristotle's famous doctrine that moral virtue is a sort of mean. To have a moral virtue is to be disposed to feel and act 'in an intermediate way'; virtues are 'mean' or 'intermediate' states. We should not think of this as a doctrine of 'moderation in everything'. Rather, it requires having feelings (e.g. of anger) and responses that are 'intermediate' in the sense of *appropriate* or *proportional*. Although Aristotle characterizes this as avoiding excess and defect, too much and too little, in truth that idea is somewhat misleading, because not every way of going wrong involves too much or too little. More helpful is the characterization of the intermediate as what is *best*, and as doing and feeling 'at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way' (II.6). His eventual definition of a moral virtue is that it is 'a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by reason, and by that reason by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it (II.b)'. So far he has outlined the roles of feelings and actions, and identified moral virtue as an acquired state of character disposing us to feel and to choose to act appropriately. As the last clause of the definition reveals, this leaves a gap in his account, to be filled once he comes to discuss the virtues of intellect, of which practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) is one of the most prominent.

Virtue Proper and Continence

Imagine two soldiers. One is reasonably fearless without being a dare-devil, has developed a proper sense of what dangers ought to be faced, and is able to face them feeling just the appropriate degree of fear. His comrade-in-arms is different; plagued by terrors he nonetheless manages to hold his post and play the part in battle he knows is expected of him. The first, but not the second, soldier is to be credited with the moral virtue of courage, according to Aristotle. Or again, imagine three citizens, with access to the pleasures a city can

offer: good food and wine, opportunities for sex. Citizen A desires and enjoys these in the appropriate measures, with due reflection but without any feeling of conflict. B indulges to no greater an extent than A, but often has to rein in his over-strong appetites for physical pleasures, while C is aware that he should do so, but at times succumbs and indulges more than he knows he should. Of these, A has the virtue of temperance, while B is merely ‘continent’ or self-controlled (*enkratēs*), and C is ‘incontinent’, in other words lacking in self-control though not yet vicious, since he realizes he shouldn’t indulge in the ways he does. Aristotle’s verdict, that A and not B is the morally virtuous one, has seemed perverse, and indeed shocking, to an ethical outlook deriving from Christianity that values overcoming temptation. But we must recall that moral virtue, i.e. excellence of character, is the best state of character a person can possess. If, by wishing, you could bring it about that your godson becomes one of these, you would surely wish him to be the first, not the second soldier, and again, like A, to be free of unruly or over-powerful appetites, rather than the one who has to curb them. We find no extended discussion of continence, but its opposite—incontinence—receives lengthy discussion, because of the apparent problem it poses in Aristotle’s moral psychology (discussed below).

The Virtues of Intellect and Practical Wisdom

The account of happiness requires a discussion (Book VI) of the virtues of intellect, for two reasons. First, as virtues, they are needed for the best life: to be happy one must employ these virtues in thinking and reasoning. Second, as we saw, the definition of moral virtue contained an essential reference to reason, namely, the reason the *phronimos* (the person of practical wisdom) uses to determine what the virtuous act is in any given instance. (For brevity, I use henceforth the Greek term, the *phronimos*.) So we need in particular a discussion of *phronēsis*, practical wisdom.

Highlighting the distinction between theoretical and practical thinking, Aristotle aligns it (VI.1) with a distinction between necessary truths, such as those of mathematics, and contingent truths such as whether there will be a sea-battle tomorrow. On the theoretical side he finds two virtues, scientific knowledge and intuitive reason, which together constitute wisdom (*sophia*) (VI.7). Since scientific knowledge requires proof, and any proof has to start from unproven

assumptions, intuitive reason (*nous*) is needed as the grasp of these starting points for the deductive reasoning he takes scientific knowledge to require. On the practical side (dealing with matters that can be otherwise, hence are suitable for deliberation) he draws an important distinction between ‘making’—the province of art (i.e. expertise in producing some outcome)—and ‘doing’, where no outcome beyond the doing itself is aimed at (VI.5). Practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) is the intellectual virtue concerned with doing.

The complex discussion reveals some tensions in his account: does the *phronimos* need general principles, or is it enough to be right in particular cases? To what extent does he deliberate and reason, or is *phronēsis* more a matter of ‘seeing’ the salient features in any situation calling for action? The latter is certainly a key feature of *phronēsis*. In the last two chapters of VI further important points are made, reinforcing the close connection between *phronēsis* and moral virtue. ‘Virtue makes the goal correct and practical wisdom makes what leads to it correct’: at first sight this suggests there is a problematic division of labour, and that the role of practical wisdom is nothing more than means–end reasoning. But this cannot be the full picture Aristotle wishes to paint. For, unless reason guides someone’s emotional development, they will not possess moral virtue in the first place. By the end of Book VI, we find that the initial division of virtues into the moral and the intellectual was somewhat misleading. *Phronēsis*, though it is an intellectual virtue, cannot develop independently of the moral virtues, while they in turn, though virtues of the non-rational (or, as we called it, semi-rational) part of a person, can only reach their perfection under the guidance of reason.⁵

The Final Account of Happiness: Contemplation

Returning, in Book X, to the initial question, Aristotle writes: ‘If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be that of the best thing in us.’ As he goes on to argue, the best thing in us is one aspect of reason, not reason in general. It is the aspect that studies unchanging objects and necessary truths; the highest activity is contemplation, and its virtue is wisdom (*sophia*), in that special

⁵ An excellent treatment of many issues arising from Book VI may be found in C. C. W. Taylor, ‘Aristotle’s Epistemology’, in S. Everson (ed.), *Companions to Ancient Thought*, i. *Epistemology* (Cambridge 1990).

sense confining it to excellence in *theoretical*, i.e. philosophical, thinking. Invoking once again the criteria he laid down in I.7 for the best good, he tries to show that the contemplative life is most end-like and most self-sufficient, and surpasses the life of moral virtue in both those respects (and others). Does this betoken a change of emphasis, or did Aristotle even in Book I lay the ground for his eventual declaration that the contemplative life is happiest, with the life of moral virtue only happiest in a secondary way?

This is a matter of intense scholarly dispute, and hard to resolve. One school of interpretation finds Aristotle firmly advocating an *inclusive* account of happiness in I.7, such that the best life will include the best *combination* of those goods we desire for themselves. Only thus can it 'not be made more desirable by the addition' of other goods. But, if Aristotle favoured such an inclusive account in Book I, this seems to clash with selecting just *one* kind of activity, contemplation, as best, and relegating the practice of moral virtue (with its consort, *practical* wisdom) to second place. The other line of interpretation notes that, alongside indications that happiness is an inclusive end, Book I already hinted that happiness would be identified with *the best of* the best activities (1099a30). Nonetheless, most of the work has focused on the moral virtues and on related issues in the philosophy of action, such as voluntariness, choice, and deliberation. That being so, the reader is likely to find surprising the final paean to the life of contemplation (X.7 and 8), and the downplaying of the value of morally virtuous action.

Aristotle's focus on practical matters, however, returns in the final chapter. True to his initial statement that ethics is a branch of politics, he asks how morally good behaviour, and the dispositions (the moral virtues) that prompt it, can best be developed. Besides the ordinary upbringing by parents, good laws are essential for a number of reasons. Laws ordain certain aspects of child-rearing; they set standards for good behaviour, and people respond better when laws, rather than despots, seek to impose standards. So a full study of ethics will need to include the discussions of law and of the best type of constitution that he will proceed to give in his *Politics*.

Aristotle's Ethics and Alternative Approaches

Those who read Aristotle and are familiar with some other important approaches in ethics are bound to ask how the theories compare.

Some even claim that Aristotle isn't really discussing *morality* as we now understand it at all. I touch briefly on two more recent, and famous, ethical theories, and then look at a newer approach, so-called neo-Aristotelian Virtue Theory.

Kant

Kant's moral theory is adumbrated in *The Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*. (A later work, the *Metaphysic of Morals*, develops and in some ways mitigates the positions taken up in the *Groundwork*.) Its key tenets include the idea that 'good will' is the only unconditionally good thing and that to have moral worth actions must be done from the motive of duty. Emotions, feelings, and inclinations, even benevolent ones, contribute nothing to the moral worth of an action. Neither actual nor intended consequences can give an action any moral worth, but only its being done for the sake of duty. Famously he writes: 'I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law.' In a different formulation, he insists that one must always treat humanity never solely as means but always also an end in itself.

Even from this very brief sketch some seemingly sharp contrasts with Aristotle's theory are evident. For Kant 'good will' is the unconditionally good thing, for Aristotle happiness. While Aristotle assumes that one's own happiness is the end it is rational to aim at, and is what the *phronimos* is concerned with, Kant goes so far as to deny that one's own happiness should be any proper concern of what he calls 'pure practical reason'. This is no doubt in part because Kant differed from Aristotle in his understanding of happiness. For Aristotle the virtuous man is one who enjoys his good actions and who has the appropriate feelings as well as acting correctly. By contrast, Kant—in effect—accords moral worth to the person Aristotle calls merely 'continent', since what matters (on Kant's account) is whether the agent is motivated by duty, not what their feelings are. Kant cannot allow that moral worth could depend in any way on non-rational appetites or inclinations. And though both thinkers lay important stress on the role of reason in the ethical life, it takes a rather different form in each. Universality is the hallmark of the morality of a maxim for Kant. Aristotle, however, in his account of practical wisdom, lays more emphasis on the particularity of the circumstances, and the need for the *phronimos* to 'see' the ethically salient features in each case.

Consequentialism

Consequentialist theories, of which utilitarianism is the most famous version, take a very different form. Jeremy Bentham and J. S. Mill—a close reader of Aristotle—are the most famous advocates of utilitarianism. As we saw, Kant's theory emphasized the motive of duty and denied any role to consequences—for this reason it is classed as a deontological theory. Consequentialism, as its name suggests, regards the consequences of actions as the only feature relevant to their rightness. For utilitarianism, what makes an action right is that it is the one (of all those available to an agent) that maximizes the general happiness. In so far as it holds that happiness is the sole intrinsically valuable thing, it seems closer to Aristotle's theory. But there are at least two major differences in this regard. First, Mill equates happiness with a mental state, pleasure (though admitting quality as well as quantity in the evaluation of pleasure). More important still, utilitarianism insists that it is the happiness of all—including sentient non-humans—and not just the agent's happiness, that is the criterion of right action. Mill writes, 'between his own happiness and that of others utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator' (*Utilitarianism*, ch. 2). And while a consequentialist theory does value many of the virtues and encourage their cultivation, it regards them as only *instrumentally* valuable. That is, they are valuable for the consequences they help bring about, since the virtues are propensities to do right actions, i.e. ones that maximize the general happiness.

Despite their enormous differences, Kantian and consequentialist ethical theories share some features. Both are primarily concerned with what makes actions right (or, in Kant's terms, what gives actions moral worth). Both seem to require impartiality, a certain disinterestedness, and a detachment from one's own concerns. That is not to say that for these theories morality is simply a matter of one's relations to others: Kant holds that one has duties to oneself, and, in consequentialism, the agent's own happiness is no less, but also no more, important than that of anyone else. But both theories lay an emphasis on disinterestedness and impartiality that contrasts sharply with what we might call the agent-centred approach of Aristotle. While his theory is by no means narrowly egoistic, it is certainly ego-centred.

Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Theories

Since the mid-twentieth century several writers have attempted to forge theories that avoid some of the perceived objectionable features of both the Kantian and consequentialist approaches, and in doing so have appealed to what they take to be essentially Aristotelian themes.⁶ There are two ways to approach this task, both of which make the notion of the best kind of human life prominent. One approach is to abandon the idea that an ethical theory has to offer its own criterion of right action. It should stress instead the questions of what sort of person one should be, and how one should live, taking into account human nature and perhaps the nature of the community in which one lives. A second way⁷ is to develop a theory that (like the first) gives a central role to human flourishing and the virtues, but that also claims to offer a criterion of right action, of a very different kind from that offered by each of the rivals discussed above.

Central tenets of this second version of 'Virtue Ethics' are: (1) What makes a virtuous action virtuous is that it is what a virtuous agent would do in the relevant circumstances; (2) A virtuous agent is one who possesses the virtues; (3) Virtues are those character-traits that enable a human being to flourish, i.e. to live the best life. Now the Aristotelian provenance of (2) and (3) are clear, and (3) is a highly controversial claim, in so far as it assumes that the virtues necessarily benefit the person who possesses them. Not that they do so in the way medicine benefits a sick person—because being healthy can be attained without medicine, while, on the theory in question, flourishing (*eudaimonia*) without the virtues is not possible; they are intrinsically, not instrumentally beneficial to the possessor. But should we credit Aristotle with (1) also?

The answer 'yes' may be suggested by a remark in II.4: 'Actions, then, are called just and temperate when they are such as the just or the temperate man would do.' But arguably the point of this remark is different, as the context indicates. The purpose of this chapter is to establish Aristotle's claim that you can do a just act without yet being a just person; he needs that for his important view that we

⁶ The revival of interest in the virtues is often credited to G. E. M. Anscombe's article 'Modern Moral Philosophy', in *Philosophy* (1958), repr. in R. Crisp and M. Slote (eds.), *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford 1990). See also Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness*, and A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

⁷ Taken by R. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford 1999).

become just by doing just acts. In the above quotation he may simply be driving the point home, as indeed the sequel to that quotation suggests. If he is not committed to (1) above, and if that is thought to be a key tenet for Virtue Ethics⁸—the so-called explanatory priority of the virtues over right or virtuous actions—then to that extent modern Virtue Ethics goes beyond what Aristotle intended.

But if we deny that Aristotle held (1), then the question arises again: what, for Aristotle, makes a given action a just or a temperate action? We have already seen that his theory of the moral virtues makes essential appeal to the idea that a virtuous action is one where an agent feels and does what is appropriate ('intermediate' or 'mean') in a given situation. But, as Aristotle himself acknowledges (VI.1), this is no more helpful than saying to someone who wants to be healthy, 'do what medical science would prescribe'. Another important claim Aristotle often makes is that a virtuous person chooses certain actions 'because of the noble' (*kalon*). Again, this hardly clarifies matters. What is it to act 'for the sake of the noble'? Must an agent act *from the thought that* his action is noble? (Probably not, but at least the man with the virtue of 'pride' will do so, IV.3.) And what characteristics of a way of acting qualify it as noble? There are no clear answers to these questions in our text, and no systematic discussion of 'the noble'.

But Aristotle would, I think, simply reject outright the demand for a criterion of right action. He expects a well-brought-up person to have a pretty good idea of what features and considerations are relevant to acting well in any given situation, and these considerations will be of many and various kinds. What consequences the action has, especially for the common good, will be one factor; the relationship in which the agent stands to the other parties involved will also be crucial. For the so-called self-regarding virtues, such as temperance, he will take it to be obvious that some kinds of indulgence simply are not appropriate to a good human life, not just because of their effect in impairing one's activities, but also in themselves. In some cases, particularly justice, he is able to say much more about what makes an action just, but in that respect, as he admits himself (V.5), justice is somewhat different from the other virtues. We return to justice and friendship below, after a discussion of Aristotle's method of ethical theorizing.

⁸ As Hursthouse suggests, *ibid.* 39.

*Aristotle's Method and Meta-ethical Assumptions**Method*

Early in the work (I.3) Aristotle says a little of his method: he will examine those of the many opinions that are the most prevalent, and are arguable, i.e. plausible. In a famous passage introducing his discussion of incontinence and related 'affections' (VII.1) he writes:

We must, as in all other cases, set the apparent facts before us and, after first discussing the difficulties, go on to prove, if possible, the truth of all the common opinions about these affections of the mind, or, failing this, of the greater number and the most authoritative; for if we both resolve the difficulties and leave the common opinions undisturbed, we shall have proved the case sufficiently.

But this important feature of his method—its dialectical character—raises a lot of questions. We know that he tries to *explain* common opinions and why they conflict, if they do. But what kind of theory does that leave? Is it just common sense morality regimented and rendered consistent? Might not a hard look at everyday moral opinions serve to undermine them—in the manner of the immoralist critiques offered by some of Plato's main speakers such as Thrasymachus? Aristotle never seems to envisage that as an outcome to his dialectical inquiry. In any case, he has more tools at his disposal than simply common opinions, important though these are. He will also draw on some theses from his other philosophical works. We have already discussed his appeal to human nature and human function (I.7). Prominent also is the thesis that activity or actuality is superior to potentiality or capacity: that explains why happiness (an activity) cannot be virtue (a state, i.e. a kind of potentiality). Views about the parts of the soul (I.13 and VI.1) and the nature of the gods (X.7 and 8) are important too.

Meta-ethical Assumptions

Despite according a lot of weight to common opinions, Aristotle is not at all tempted to adopt a relativist or subjectivist view of ethics. That is, he neither holds that right and wrong can only be relative to a given society, nor that right and wrong are simply a matter of what someone or some group believes to be so.

He had come across views such as these, and alludes to them early on (I.3):

‘Now noble and just actions, which political science investigates, exhibit much variety and fluctuation, so that they may be thought to exist only by convention, and not by nature.’

Some thinkers did indeed draw the conclusion that the just and the noble (*kalon*) exist only by convention. The variety and fluctuation he has in mind is twofold: the variety of views about what is just, and the fact that what is just fluctuates according to circumstance. These facts explain why some have concluded that all morality is a matter of convention (*nomos*), i.e. is a matter of what people believe, or have enshrined in law, and that nothing is right or wrong ‘by nature’. In V.7 he returns to the subject, this time discussing the question whether justice is simply a matter of *nomos*, law or convention, or whether some things are just or unjust by nature. Again he remarks that what prompts the view that all justice is a matter of convention is the recognition of the variability of justice.

In response, Aristotle adopts a position that has a lot of merit, and exposes a mistake that is still commonly found in modern discussions of ethics. To put it in modern terms, he insists on moral objectivity, while denying universality. The view he opposes thinks that, without universally true moral judgements, there are no objectively true moral judgements. And this, he rightly points out, is an error. Judgements about right or wrong, just or unjust, may be objectively true or false; their truth is more than a matter of someone’s believing them to be true. It does not follow, he insists, that ethical truths must take the form ‘it is always unjust to withhold payment of a debt’ or ‘you should always defer to the authority of your father’. Even if these are usually correct, there may be exceptions, which the *phronimos*, the person with trained moral understanding, will recognize. You don’t have to insist that X-ing is always or universally wrong, to hold that it is objectively true that X-ing on this occasion would be wrong. The point is developed in his discussion (V.10) of equity. This virtue involves recognizing where legal justice needs modifying to suit the particular case.

What the basis of these objective moral truths is is a difficult matter, and, as we saw above, not one Aristotle gives a clear answer to. In this he fares no worse—arguably—than any other moral philosopher. But nailing the mistake just described was a signal achievement.⁹

⁹ See R. Heinaman (ed.), *Aristotle and Moral Realism* (London 1995), for a series of essays discussing these issues.

Other-Regarding and Self-Regarding Concerns

As we have seen, Aristotle holds that it is rational to make my own happiness the end at which I aim. His ethics is the study of what happiness is and how it is to be achieved, and his account of the virtues assumes that the virtues—both moral and intellectual—are, essentially, states that benefit their possessor. Does this not miss the point of morality, some will ask? What room does he leave for concern for others, for the need to recognize the claims they have on me, and, at times, to give them priority over myself and my own happiness?

While a full answer to these questions cannot be given in this brief introduction, consideration of two so-far undiscussed topics will help: justice and friendship.

Justice (Book V)

‘Justice is another’s good’ declared Thrasymachus (Plato, *Republic* 1), and so he declares it to be not worth having. Aristotle agrees with the first, but still holds it to be a virtue. As a virtue it must be good for the agent as well as for others, though Aristotle does not spell out how this is so. Instead, he draws some important distinctions, some of which have dominated accounts of justice ever since. First he distinguishes what he calls ‘universal’ justice and injustice from ‘particular’ justice and injustice. Universal justice, he says, is the whole of virtue in its other-regarding aspect. Particular justice is one specific kind of virtue, which in turn has important subdivisions.

‘The whole of virtue in its other-regarding aspect’ is an interesting concept, suggesting that in some way all branches of moral virtue, even those we think of as self-regarding, such as temperance, involve our relations to others. But Aristotle does not develop this intriguing idea further. Instead he goes into ‘particular justice’, distinguishing distributive—the variety that deals with the fair distribution of goods and burdens—from what he calls rectificatory justice. In the first he makes the crucial observation that sharing goods fairly means taking into account the relevant merits of the parties concerned, and sharing out the goods in proportion to those merits. But he doesn’t attempt to discuss what is the *right* basis to take account of. As such he gives a formal but not a substantive account of fair distribution. As for the second—rectificatory justice—instead of discussing just punishment, as we might expect, he focuses on making things right for the

victim—hence the label ‘rectificatory’. The conceptual distinctions he draws in these chapters (with the ‘help’ of some mathematical illustrations) are important. But we look in vain for a defence of acting justly, of a kind that would answer the sceptic’s worry that acting justly benefits another *and not oneself*.

Friendship

One-fifth of the whole work (Books VIII and IX) is devoted to friendship, a mark of its importance for Aristotle. In these books we find further exploration of the role of other-regarding concerns in ethics. But it takes a very different shape from that found in moralities that stress impartiality. In his account, the people we can consider our friends can extend as widely as fellow citizens but some *relation to the agent* is crucial. (The term ‘friends’ includes loved ones such as relatives, business associates, and others.) The idea that we might have obligations to others simply as such is completely absent from Aristotle, and from all moralities he would have been familiar with. The best kind of friendship, he maintains, is friendship with those to whom we wish well and with whom we can spend time in shared valuable activities, all *because of their virtue*. Friendships based on pleasure and utility also exist, he allows, but only the first kind is perfect friendship.

On the one hand we may be puzzled by this restriction, and may protest that true friendship can exist between those who are not virtuous people. On the other, we may feel that Aristotle still has too egocentric an approach when he argues that our relation to our friends is in some way derivative from our relation to ourselves (IX.3). In an important chapter on self-love (IX.8) we find him recognizing, and not fully resolving, the tension between his egocentric approach and his correct insistence that in friendship one wishes another good for that other’s sake.

In the books on friendship, contrasting aspects of Aristotle’s writings are very evident. His more theoretical discussions can seem obscure and strained, for instance his convoluted proof in IX.9 showing why the happy person will need virtuous friends. But at many points, for instance in the chapters (VIII.13–IX.3) discussing specific issues—the casuistry of friendship—and in his insightful remarks about the love of mothers for their children, we find Aristotle displaying a sure touch and a more plausible grasp of the nature and value of friendship.

*Aristotle's Moral Psychology**Voluntary and Involuntary*

Students of virtue and legislators alike need to know about the basis of voluntariness (III.1). The main outlines Aristotle gives have stood the test of time. Lack of knowledge and lack of power (i.e. being 'forced'), the chief excusing conditions in today's law, are the criteria he identified for an act not being voluntary. He draws an important distinction between force proper and cases where people claim they were compelled, but where external force is not involved. The latter are 'the things that are done from fear of greater evils or for some noble object (e.g. if a tyrant were to order one to do something base, having one's parents and children in his power, and if one did the action they were to be saved, but otherwise would be put to death)': since one *did* them to avoid something worse, the actions are not forced, nor involuntary. Labelling them 'mixed, but more like voluntary' he adds a vital point: even though it's your act, and so not involuntary, it doesn't follow that you should be blamed for doing it. Praise (if you saved the crew by jettisoning the cargo) or pardon (if you did a wrongful act under terrible pressure) may be appropriate.

The discussion of when ignorance makes an act involuntary is complex, but contains an important distinction. The excuse 'I didn't know' is not sufficient to exculpate; what matters is whether the ignorance was your fault or not (III.5). Hence acts done *in* ignorance but *by reason of* drunkenness or anger don't count as involuntary, and are liable to blame. In III.5 Aristotle tries to show (against the sceptics) that we are responsible for our good and bad characters as well as for our good and bad actions. This is the closest he comes to a discussion of the modern problem of the basis of moral responsibility. He puts the sceptics' arguments strongly, and, though he dismisses them, he perhaps concedes something to them when formulating his conclusion: 'we are somehow part-causes of our states of character'.

Choice

What matters in a law-court, and for praise or blame, is whether the act was voluntary. But what matters for questions of virtue and vice is whether your acts are not merely voluntary but also chosen. Choice, *prohairesis*, is an important but also puzzling concept. It is narrower than our everyday notion of choice (and indeed Aristotle also has a

concept nearer to that, *hairesis*.) A child cannot manifest choice (in this technical sense), and when I act in anger, or in an incontinent manner, my acts are voluntary—so can be praised or blamed—but are not chosen. Only an adult with a settled and reasoned state of character can make choices, in Aristotle's sense. He discusses choice (III.2–3), and concludes that it is 'deliberate desire of things in our power'. Virtue was defined (II.6) as a state of character concerned with choice, in other words, issuing in choices, and vice is the same (except of course that the choices of the one are good and of the other bad). So, as Aristotle admits (V.9), it's quite hard to be unjust! Plenty of people do virtuous acts without yet being virtuous—for instance all those who are still learning to be virtuous (II.1, 4). Their acts may be praised, even though they cannot yet be credited with possessing a virtue. And plenty of people do bad acts without being vicious; their bad acts are voluntary, and deserve blame, but are not choices. Signal examples of this are incontinent actions.

Incontinence

Can someone know what is best, but act contrary to that knowledge, being overcome by pleasure or pain or anger or some such passion? Yes, say 'the many', i.e. most people; no, counters Socrates in Plato's dialogue *Protagoras*. Socrates' theses that virtue is knowledge and that the person who knows what is best will always do it, are ones Aristotle touches on at several points (VI.13, VII.1–3). Already in II.4 he argued that, to possess virtue, knowing was not as important as reliably choosing, for their own sakes, the virtuous actions. So we expect him to side with the many against Socrates, and accept the common opinion that 'the incontinent man, knowing that what he does is bad, does it as a result of passion' (VII.1). He certainly affirms that incontinent actions are voluntary and blameworthy. But instead of robustly insisting that the incontinent person acts in full knowledge that what he does is bad, he develops a set of distinctions between different ways of knowing, and different parts (premisses) of a piece of practical reasoning. At one point—apparently siding with Socrates—he likens an incontinent person to those asleep, mad, or drunk. This is apparently because, under the influence of the strong passion—say, desire for another drink—the incontinent person's knowledge (say, that this is one too many) is temporarily inaccessible. Does Aristotle at any point allow (with 'the many') that when acting

incontinently a person's knowledge and reasoning can be unimpaired? There are very diverse interpretations of this difficult chapter (VII.3), and different answers. One thing is clear: Aristotle is keen to distance himself from any view (of Plato or Socrates) that equates all vice with incontinence or lack of self-control. Unlike the vicious person, the incontinent has the right overall standards and choices, and, to that extent at least, knows that what he is now doing is bad, even if, in some other way, at the very moment of acting, he does not do so in full knowledge.

Concluding Remarks

Can work in ethics have relevance and even truth in all historical periods? Some writers in a broadly Aristotelian tradition—such as A. MacIntyre¹⁰—disown such an ambition, holding that any conception of the best life and of what the virtues are is necessarily grounded in a given historical period and community. Aristotle shows no such qualms; he seems concerned to present a theory that is more universal in its scope, based on an account of human nature as such. But, two and a half millennia later and in the light of developments in morality and in moral theory, today's readers may be struck, and even appalled, by some of his assumptions and values. Aristotle accepts slavery, and a lowly status for women, without question, though his remarks on women's love for their children are telling and sympathetic. The translation makes no attempt to avoid the frequent use of 'man'—as in 'the truthful man', 'the boastful man', 'the good-tempered man', and so forth. For the virtues and vices described are those of males, and his assumption from the start is that the best life can be lived only by well-born, well-educated male citizens with no need to earn their own living. Only these can develop those virtues (intellectual and/or moral) in whose practice the life of happiness consists.

And in the list of virtues and vices we find some surprising inclusions, and likewise omissions. We have already seen that impartiality was no kind of ideal for Aristotle, though to what extent it should be reckoned a value today is a controversial matter. Likewise the idea that we should try to alleviate suffering and help our fellow men no matter how remote from us is quite foreign to Aristotle and indeed to all at his time. Neither kindness nor cruelty get a mention, despite the proximity Aristotle had had to the ruthless conqueror Alexander.

¹⁰ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London 1981).

For Aristotle the virtue of truthfulness is a matter of being appropriately open about *your own merits*, not of truth-telling in general. The two grand-scale virtues are perhaps at first sight the most foreign: magnificence—making large-scale public donations appropriately (IV.2), and *megalopsuchia*, literally ‘greatness of soul’ but here translated as ‘pride’ (IV.3). The properly proud man is and knows himself to be worthy of great honour. He acts appropriately; he is a man of few deeds but great and noble ones, with a slow step, a deep voice, and a level utterance. But here too modern readers find some admirable features: the proud man overlooks wrongs done to him; speaks his mind freely; maintains his dignity among equals but is unassuming with those of lower social status; does not gossip or harbour grudges.

For many readers the most alien aspect of Aristotle’s ethics may be its ultimate elevation (X.7, 8) of the life of philosophical contemplation above any other life, including that of the active citizen who develops and manifests the moral virtues. We have already noted the scholarly dispute over this perhaps surprising development at the end of the work. However, many traditions, both Western and Eastern, accord highest place to a life in which man transcends his more human nature and the need for the human virtues. From a different perspective, we might be surprised that Aristotle never considers, as a candidate for the best life, that of the poet or dramatist, artist or sculptor. The reason, I think, is to be found in a metaphysical assumption: any activity that has an end beyond itself is for that reason less valuable than activities that are ends in themselves. At one blow all forms of creativity are demoted, including, perhaps, Aristotle’s own productive investigations into all matters philosophical. Yet, despite his strange claim that those who know pass their time more pleasantly than those who inquire (X.7), we may be thankful for Aristotle’s life of inquiry.

NOTE ON THE TEXT AND TRANSLATION

THE translation is that of the noted Aristotle scholar, W. D. Ross. It was first published in 1925 in volume ix of *The Works of Aristotle translated into English* (Oxford University Press). It is based on the Oxford Classical Text of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (ed. Bywater) from which, wrote Ross, he departed only occasionally, where there seemed to be a good deal to be gained by doing so. The translation was revised by J. O. Urmson in 1973, and published in World's Classics in 1980 with further revisions by J. L. Ackrill.

For the present edition a very few further changes have been made. Like the previous revisers, the current editor has left unchanged Ross's translation of the central terminology, with a very few exceptions. For example, *logos*, which Ross usually translated as 'rational principle' or 'rule', I have rendered with 'reason' at almost all points; and I have translated *orthos logos* as 'correct reason'. In III.1 'force' and cognates are now used consistently for *bia*, 'compelled'/'compulsion' for cognates of *anagkē*. I have substituted 'for the sake of the noble' where Ross often had 'for honour's sake' when the Greek uses *kalon*. In V.5 the literal translation 'need' now replaces 'demand' for *chreia*. In a handful of places a now almost obsolete term has been replaced (e.g. 'drink' for 'draught', 'perfume' for 'unguent'). Written over eighty years ago, the translation is still justly admired, and has required little further adjustment.

The numbering system, with references such as 1098b10, is that used by all modern editors, translators, and commentators. The numbers (Bekker numbers) derive from the 1831 Berlin edition of Aristotle's works. The marginal numbers correspond to those of the Greek text; this means that occasionally in the translation the correspondence is not exact. For those using secondary literature, having the Bekker line numbers is nonetheless an invaluable help. Where a passage in the translation is enclosed by square brackets, the corresponding Greek words are regarded by the editor of the Oxford Classical Text as a marginal gloss.

The reference II.4, for example, is to Book II chapter 4. The division into books goes back to antiquity, while that into chapters is more recent. Occasionally the chapter breaks come at an illogical point.

The headings and summaries used, as well as the occasional numbers in the body of the translation, are (apart from a few that I have revised) those introduced by Ross. The footnoted cross-references were also supplied in Ross's original translation. As with the Introduction, the explanatory endnotes are newly written for this edition. They are much fuller than the previous notes, but very occasionally I have quoted *verbatim*, with acknowledgement, Ross's original note. Endnotes are indicated by an asterisk in the text.

I should like to acknowledge my debt to the writings (and also the lectures) of J. L. Ackrill, and to the work of S. Broadie and C. Rowe, and of T. H. Irwin, in their respective translations with notes, as well as the commentary by C. C. W. Taylor on Books II–IV.

The *Nicomachean Ethics* has been the subject of innumerable commentaries since antiquity, not least by St Thomas Aquinas; about one commentary a decade has appeared since the Middle Ages, according to one estimate.¹ All who venture to comment on the work owe a profound debt to the labours of their predecessors.

¹ A. Kenny, *The Aristotelian Ethics* (Oxford 1978), 1.

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