

Aristotle

384-322 BC

Aristotle was Plato's greatest student and also his greatest rival. After studying with Plato in the Academy for many years, and then being passed over in the search for a successor to Plato, Aristotle went home to become tutor to the Macedonian prince who would grow up to be Alexander the Great, and later he returned to Athens to found his own school, the Lyceum, as a rival to Plato's Academy. Much of western intellectual history can be interpreted as a struggle between the respective views of Aristotle and Plato.

In his theory of knowledge, Aristotle rejected the Platonic "theory of the two worlds", accepted the world of the senses as fully real, and argued that all knowledge comes ultimately from the senses. He agreed with Plato that real knowledge could be only of the eternal and unchanging "form" of things, but he insisted that we come to know this form of essence through inductive reasoning after classifying and studying many particular examples of the thing with the aid of the senses. In science he taught that the universe is finite and earth-centred and is animated by the aspiration of all objects and beings to realize their natural purpose and perfect end, or *telos*.

The selection included in this reading, a series of extracts from his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books I and II, shows that in ethics Aristotle adopted a practical and common-sense approach. Here, he begins a discussion about "the good," for, he maintains, all human action aims at some good, and knowledge of the highest good would have a great influence on life. Such talk of "the good" sounds very Platonic, but for Aristotle "the good" is not an ideal form existing apart in some eternal realm. Following his own common-sense approach, Aristotle says that the good at which all human actions aim is "happiness."

The problem for Aristotle is that there is no agreement about just what happiness is. Ultimately, however, he defines happiness as virtuous living, and this "virtuous living" is something that is possible for all persons, philosophers and non-philosophers. Aristotle, unlike Plato who saw virtue as part of the life lived in accordance with philosophical knowledge of the forms, reckons that virtuous action lies in adhering to a middle way between the two extremes of excess and deficiency. Thus as humans we find happiness in the habit of choosing the "golden mean" between extremes, and so ethics is taken out of the realm of speculative philosophy where Plato had placed it. For Aristotle it is a practical matter open to everyone.

Review Questions

1. At the outset of his *Ethics*, what description does Aristotle offer for "the Good" (the supreme good)? Does it sound different from "the Good" of Plato?
2. According to Aristotle, who is qualified to study the political science in search of the Good?
3. Does Aristotle see any general agreement about what the Good is?

Book I

The Object of Life

All human activity aims at some end or good, but one end may be subordinated to another

1. Every art and every investigation, and similarly every action and purpose, seems to aim at some good. And so the Good has correctly been defined as 'that at which all things aim'. ... Since there are many actions, arts and sciences, naturally their ends are also many; the end of medical science is health; of shipbuilding, a ship; of military science, victory; of economics, wealth. ...

If, then, our activities have some end which we desire for its own sake, and for the sake of which all the other ends are desired, and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for this process would go on without end, so that our desire becomes pointless and empty)—it is clear that this must be the Good and the supreme Good. Does it not follow, then, that for the conduct of life knowledge of the Good is of great importance? And like archers who have a mark to aim at, are we not more likely to achieve what is right? If this is so, we must try to understand, in outline at least, what the Good is, and to which of the sciences or faculties it belongs. Now it would seem that the Good belongs to the science that is most authoritative and most truly a master science. It is clear that politics is of such a nature; for it is this that dictates what is to be taught in states, and what each segment of the citizens should learn and to what extent. ...

The student should have some general knowledge and experience of life

3. ... Each man judges well the things that he knows, and of these he is the best judge; thus the man who has been educated in a certain area is the best judge in that area, while the man who has a general education is a good judge in general. For this reason a young man is not a fit person to hear lectures on political science, because he lacks the practical business of life from which political discussion begins and takes its subject-matter. Moreover, since he tends to follow his passions, he will

take nothing from this course of study, since its aim is not knowledge but action. It makes no difference whether he is young in age or youthful in character. The defect is not a result of time, but of living and pursuing each object as passion dictates; knowledge is as unprofitable for these people as it is for the incontinent. But for those who regulate their impulses and act in accordance with a rational principle, knowledge of these subjects will be a great benefit. ...

While the goal is happiness, views of happiness differ

4. Let us resume our argument. Since all knowledge and every pursuit aims at some good, what is it that we say is the goal of political science, and what is the highest of all goods brought about by action? Certainly there is general agreement concerning its name. Both the ordinary people and those who are refined call it 'happiness', and identify it with faring well and living well. But when it comes to saying what happiness is, they differ, and the many are in disagreement with the opinion of the wise. The former take it to be something obvious and clear, such as pleasure, wealth or honour. And there are various other views, and often the same man changes his opinion; when he is ill he says that it is health, and when he is poor that it is money. And many, conscious of their own ignorance, look in admiration on those who profess something fine and beyond their own comprehension. On the other hand, some [such as the Platonic school, ed] have held the view that beyond all these many goods there is another absolute good that is the cause of all these others goods. It would no doubt be rather futile to examine all these opinions; it is sufficient to consider those that are most prevalent or seem to have something rational in them.

*The Good must be the ultimate end or object of human life, something that is in itself completely satisfying.
Happiness fits the description*

7. ... Since there is more than one end, and since we choose some of them (e.g. wealth or flutes or tools generally) as means to something else, it is clear that not all of them are final ends. However, the supreme good is obviously something final. ...

Now happiness, above all else, is thought to be just such an end, because we always choose it for itself, and never for any other reason. And while we choose honour, pleasure, intelligence and other virtues for themselves (and even if nothing results from these we would choose them), we choose them also for the sake of our happiness, believing that through them we will be happy. On the other hand, no-one chooses happiness for the sake of these things nor, in general, for the sake of anything other than itself. ... Happiness seems to be something final and self-sufficient, and is also the end of actions.

But what is happiness? If we consider what the function of man is, we find that happiness is a virtuous activity of soul

But presumably to say that happiness is the supreme good seems a platitude, and a somewhat clearer account of it is still needed. This might perhaps be done if the function of human beings is understood. Just as for a flautist or a sculptor or any artist, or in general for any who have a specific function or activity, goodness and excellence is thought to lie in the performance of that function, so it would seem for a man if he has a certain function. For is it likely that carpenters and shoemakers have certain functions or activities, while man has none, born without a function? Just as there appears to be a function for the eye and hand and foot and every one of our members, should we not assume that a human being similarly has a function separate from these? What, then, can this possibly be? Life seems to be something shared also by plants, but we are looking for something peculiar to man; we must exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there will be a principle of life that might be called perceptive; but this too appears to be shared by horses and cattle and animals of all kinds. There remains, then, a practical life with some sort of rational principle. ... Now if the function of man is an activity of the soul in accordance with, or implying, a rational principle, and if we say that the function of an individual and that of a good individual is of the same kind (*e.g.* of a lyre player and of a good lyre player, and so on generally), the latter's excellence being attached to the name of the function (because the function of the lyre player is to play the lyre, but that of the good lyre player is to play well); and if we establish that the function of man is a certain kind of life, an activity or series of actions of the soul, implying a rational principle; and if the function of a good man is to perform these well and nobly; and if any function is performed well when performed in accordance with its proper excellence: if all this is so, then human good is

associated with the actions of an excellent soul.

But we must also add 'in a complete lifetime.' For one swallow does not make a summer, and nor does one day. Similarly one day, or a brief space of time, does not make a man blessed and happy.

. . . .
How is happiness acquired?

9. From this arises the question of whether happiness is something achieved by teaching, or habit, or training of any kind, or whether it comes from some divine dispensation, or, finally, by chance. Now if there is *any* gift of the gods for men, it seems reasonable that happiness should be a gift from the gods, especially since it is the best of things for humans. But perhaps this question is more appropriate to another enquiry. But even if happiness is not divinely-sent, but comes by means of virtue, through training or learning of some sort, it still seems to be something most divine; for whatever is the prize and end of virtue seems to be best and most god-like and a blessing. ...

The answer to our question is also clear from the definition of happiness, for it has been described as a certain kind of virtuous activity of the soul. Of the remaining goods, it is necessary that some be pre-conditions for happiness while others be contributors to it and serve as instruments. And this agrees with what we said at the outset, that the goal of political science is the best end and that it aims to make good citizens capable of noble actions. Naturally, therefore, we do not call an ox or a horse or any other animal happy, because none of them can take part in this sort of activity. For the same reason no child is happy either, its age making it incapable of performing such activities; if children are called happy, it is because of the hope of the future that they are being congratulated. For as we have said, happiness requires not only complete virtue but also a complete life. Many changes and all sorts of chances occur in life, and even the most prosperous suffer a reversal in old age, as is told of Priam in the Trojan cycle; one who has suffered such misfortunes and ended his life wretchedly is not called happy. [In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Priam is the King of Troy, who loses his throne, family and life, when his city is destroyed by the Greek forces.]

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Book II

Moral Goodness

Moral virtue, like crafts, is acquired by practice

1. There are two kinds of virtue, intellectual and moral. For the most part, intellectual virtue owes both its origin and its growth from teaching, and for this reason needs time and experience. Moral virtue, on the other hand, is the result of habit. ... The virtues, then, arise in us neither by nature nor contrary to it; nature conditions us to accept them, and they become perfected through habit. ...

We acquire virtues only after acting, which is also what happens in the case of the arts. For those things that we must learn before we do them, we learn by doing: men become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre. So too do we become just by performing just acts, temperate by performing temperate ones, brave by performing brave ones. ...

It is in the way that we deal with other people that we become just or unjust, and the way we behave in the face of danger, by accustoming ourselves to be fearful or confident, that we become brave or cowardly. Similar are situations involving desires and angry feelings: some people become temperate and patient, others licentious and quick to anger by acting one way or another in certain situations. Thus, in short, like activities produce like characters. Hence our actions are necessarily of a certain quality, because it is their characteristics that determine the resulting dispositions. So it is a matter of no little importance what sort of habits we form from our youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference in the world.

Acts that are incidentally virtuous distinguished from those that are done knowingly, of choice, and from a virtuous disposition

4. A difficulty, however, may be raised as to how we can say that people become just by performing just acts, and temperate by performing temperate ones; because if men do what is just and temperate, they are just and temperate already, in the same way that if they employ grammar or play music correctly they are already grammarians or musicians. But is this even true of the arts? For it is possible to act in accordance with the rules of grammar, either by chance or with the guidance of another; he will be a grammarian, then, only when he has said something grammatical and said it grammatically. And this can be done only through the grammatical knowledge within himself. ...

But just because virtuous acts have a certain quality, it does not mean that they are done in a just or temperate way. This is so only if the agent also acts in a certain condition; he must know what he is doing; he must choose the act, and choose it for its own sake; and he must do it from a firm and permanent disposition. ... Acts, then, are called just and temperate when they are such as a just and temperate man would do; however, the man who does these is not just and temperate by virtue of doing them, but becomes so when he does them in a way that just and temperate men do.

Moral virtue is not a feeling or a faculty, but a disposition.

5. We must now consider what virtue is. Since the things of the soul fall into three categories—passions, faculties and dispositions—virtue must be one of these. By *passions* I mean desire, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, friendliness, hatred, longing, emulation, pity, and in general all conditions that are accompanied by pleasure or pain. By *faculties* I mean those things in virtue of which we are said to be capable of these feelings, e.g. capable of anger or sorrow or pity. By *dispositions* I mean conditions in virtue of which we are well or ill disposed in respect of the passions. For example, we have a bad disposition towards anger if it is felt too strongly or too weakly, and a good one if it is felt moderately. The situation is similar with the other feelings.

Now neither the virtues nor the vices are passions, because we are not called good or bad because of our passions, but because of our virtues and vices. ... By the same reasoning they are not faculties either. We are not called good or bad, nor are we praised or blamed, merely because we are capable of feeling. Again, we have the faculties we do through nature; but it is not nature that makes us good or bad, as we have said before. Thus if virtues are neither feelings nor faculties, it remains that they should be dispositions.

The doctrine of the Mean

6. However, we must not only describe virtue as a disposition, but must also say what *kind* of disposition it is. ...

By an 'objective mean', I mean that which is equidistant from each of two extremes, which is one and the same for all; by a "mean relative to us" I mean that which is neither excessive or deficient, and this is not one and the same for all. ... The 'mean relative to us' is

not to be taken as an arithmetical proportion. Suppose that ten pounds of food is a large and two pounds a small allowance for an athlete—it does not follow that the trainer will prescribe six pounds; for even this is perhaps too much or too little for the particular person who is to receive it—too little for Milo [a legendary ancient wrestler from Italy], but too much for one who is beginning to train. The same holds true for running and wrestling. A master of any art will thus avoid excess and deficiency, but seeks the mean and chooses it—not an objective mean, but one relative to us.

For example, fear, confidence, desire, anger, pity, and pleasure and pain in general, can be felt too much or too little; and both of these cases are wrong. But to have these feelings at the right times, occasioned by the right things, towards the right people for the right motive and in the right way is to feel them to an intermediate, that is to the best, degree; and this is characteristic of virtue. ... Virtue, then, is a mean condition, since it aims at what is intermediate.

A provisional definition of virtue

Virtue is thus a disposition concerned with choice and lying in a mean that is relative to us, determined by a rational principle, and by that principle which the prudent man would use to determine it. It is a mean between two kinds of vice, one of excess and the other of deficiency. It is a mean because these vices fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both discovers and chooses the mean. ...

But not every action or passion admits of a mean; some have names that already suggest wickedness,

such as malice, shamelessness and envy, and among actions adultery, theft and murder. All these, and more like them, imply they are evil by their very names; it is not the excess or deficiency of them that is evil. It is impossible, then, to act rightly with respect to these; one is always wrong.

The doctrine of the mean applied to particular virtues

7. Regarding feelings of fear and confidence, the mean is courage; of those who go to extremes the man who exceeds in fearlessness has no name to describe him, while the one who exceeds in confidence is called rash, and he who exceeds in fear and is deficient in confidence is called a coward. Regarding pleasures and pains— not all, especially not all pains— the mean is temperance, the excess self-indulgence; one rarely finds persons deficient with regard to pleasures, and so such people have no name to describe them; but let us call them insensible. Regarding the giving and receiving of money, the mean is liberality, the excess and the deficiency are prodigality and illiberality; but these people show excess and deficiency in contrary ways: the prodigal man goes too far in spending and not far enough in receiving, while the illiberal man goes too far in getting money and falls short in spending it. ...

[From *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. J. Geysen. 2001]