

Aristotle's Ethics

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Introduction

In Homer's *Iliad* Achilles loves his friend Patroclus. The Trojan prince, Hector, kills Patroclus in battle. Achilles, enraged, kills Hector. Having killed Hector, Achilles drags his body daily around the tomb of Patroclus behind his chariot, and leaves it out at night to be mutilated by scavenger dogs. This is truly barbarous behaviour; the gods, who are not unduly squeamish, are horrified and hold a council to decide what to do about it. In the course of their debate Apollo denounces Achilles and adds: 'Let him beware lest we become angry with him, even though he is good.'

The point of this short narrative lies in the last four words: 'though he is good'; we, with our cultural background, might rather have expected: 'since he is very bad'. But Homer sees things differently. Apollo, though an enemy of the Greeks, must acknowledge that Achilles is good, for, after all, he is the son of the goddess Thetis, his father is a king, he is the greatest living warrior, he is rich, he is handsome, he is famous. No Greek of Homer's time, be he god or man, could call such a hero bad. To be bad typically involves being poor, ugly and cowardly, like Thersites in the *Iliad*, and Achilles is not like that. All men ought to be just and obey the laws of the gods, so Achilles could properly be censured, but he could not be called bad.

Homer's ideals and those of the men he wrote for were, of course, long outdated by the time of Plato and Aristotle. But still the good life was that which was to be envied, the most choiceworthy. The rule of the well born and wealthy was still

called aristocracy – the rule of the best. To be good was to be enviable; to be righteous was to be praiseworthy. Unless we understand this we cannot understand Greek ethical thought.

But while goodness and righteousness were traditionally different, the great and the good were still expected to be righteous. The ideal king was just, generous and cared for his people. By Plato's time the existence of any link between goodness and righteousness had come to be questioned. In Plato's dialogues this is illustrated by such men as Polus and Callicles in the *Gorgias* and Thrasymachus in the *Republic*. In the *Republic*, when Socrates asks Thrasymachus: 'So you think that unrighteous men are sensible and good?', Thrasymachus replies: 'Yes, if they are capable of perfect unrighteousness'; the only reason for conforming to morality is fear of the consequences of not doing so. The case is perhaps best put by Glaucon and Adeimantus in Book II of the *Republic*; if you can get the praise given to the righteous by merely seeming to be righteous, what is the point of being restrained by rules of justice and fairness which are a fabrication of the many weak to protect them from the strong? Is not the best life that which affords the maximum satisfaction of one's desires, and has such a life any room for norms of behaviour that restrain that satisfaction?

Now Plato, who regarded such questioners as the main enemy, might in theory have said: 'Never mind about being happy and living the good life; never mind about your personal wellbeing; it is more important to be righteous'. But in fact he never even hints at such a line of argument. He never questions that the rational man will aim at the most worthwhile life, happiness, fulfilment. His strategy is quite different; his aim is to show that being just, being righteous, is an indispensable element in the good life, that Callicles and Thrasymachus are wrong, not for seeking the most rewarding life, but for failing to recognize what it is.

An analogy might be this: suppose that a music lover finds that those around him all agree that they want to listen to the best music; he, too, wants this, but thinks that the music that the others regard as the best is trivial, impermanent and shallow. He does not say: 'Never mind about the best music; seek the sort

of music that I favour'. What he says is: 'Of course we must seek the best music, but you are mistaken about what is the best music which is in fact like this . . .'. So Plato tries to show that traditional moral excellence, such as truthfulness, piety, justice and courage, are ingredients in the best life rather than impediments to or limitations on it.

We need not suppose that Aristotle was convinced by every detail of Plato's arguments in the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*. But he accepts in his ethical writings the conclusion of those dialogues that the wise man who wishes for the best life will accept the requirements of morality. So the modern inquirer who is concerned with the arguments for and against moral scepticism, moral nihilism and moral relativism should turn to Plato rather than to Aristotle. Aristotle, as he himself says (1095b 4-8), takes it for granted that his hearers and readers will be people who have been well brought up, who do not need to be taught how to behave and who do not need to be persuaded to accept the claims of morality. He is concerned to lead us into a systematic consideration of the best way to live one's life that goes beyond what the non-philosopher, however sound in moral judgment, ever attempts. His aim is, as he often says, (for example, at 1103b 26-30), practical, but he attempts to achieve it, not by converting us from wicked ways, but by 'deepening our understanding. We are to be involved in an intellectual enquiry to determine what is the best sort of life, not in an attempt to convert us to an already known ideal.

If one is to lead the best sort of life, the life most worth living, one will ideally be equipped with all human excellences – excellence of character, certainly, but also excellence of intelligence, of health, of looks and of birth. Such excellences as health, good looks and good birth, though mentioned in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as desirable and elements in the best life (1099b 2-3), are not discussed there in detail; a discussion of good health, for example, would belong more properly to a biological work. But Aristotle considers it necessary to examine in careful detail excellence of character, excellence of the intelligence that is essential in practical affairs as the complement of excellence of character, and other problems of action before he is

ready for his final discussion of the good life. These are the problems with which the major portion of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is concerned.

Given the scope of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as it has just been briefly indicated, it is surely one of the best books on the problems of conduct ever written by a philosopher. But it is also one of the most difficult to understand correctly. Having studied it as an undergraduate in the 1930s and having held tutorials and seminars on it and lectured on it every year from 1946 to 1980, I have found myself every year coming to understand, or ceasing to misunderstand, some passage the significance of which has always eluded me. No doubt my understanding of the text is still imperfect, but, such as it is, I shall set it out in the following chapters.

No doubt any philosophical text of substance is difficult and requires hard work from the reader. But there are three main sources of difficulty and misunderstanding in reading the *Nicomachean Ethics* not present in a typical modern philosophical text. First, Aristotle approaches the problems of conduct from a point of view and makes use of many concepts that are different from those with which we are familiar today. In the English-speaking world, whatever our personal beliefs may be, our Judeo-Christian cultural heritage has profoundly influenced our ways of thinking; Aristotle, writing in the fourth century BC, was untouched by these influences. It is by no means impossible for us to come to understand the approach of Aristotle and his Greek contemporaries and to come to grasp the concepts with which they worked, but we do have to learn to do so; until we do, it is fatally easy for us to misunderstand by quite naturally interpreting their concepts in the light of ours. While this is a source of difficulty, these differences are also of value, for to learn to see issues from a new and different cultural perspective as well as our own cannot but be an advantage. One need not suggest that Aristotle's approach is better than ours, but it usefully stretches our minds if we lean to comprehend it.

A second source of difficulty for us in trying to understand Aristotle, arising in part as a consequence of the first, is the veil of translation. When that great translator, Cicero, set himself to

give an account of Greek philosophy in Latin, he had to invent many new words and stretch the meaning of others, in order to do so. Thus, for example, he simply invented the word *qualitas*, which has become, in English, 'quality'. The pre-philosophical English language was in the same position as Latin before the time of Cicero. So the translators into English have had to imitate Cicero, and they have often done so by merely transliterating Cicero's Latin terms. Thus Cicero's translation of the Greek word *arete* was *virtus*, which in English became 'virtue', and similarly, Cicero's *vitium* was translated as 'vice'. But if we think that the words 'virtue' and 'vice' in translations of Aristotle have the meaning we should naturally expect, we shall be, and ought to be, greatly perplexed. We shall find Aristotle telling us that not enjoying eating the moderate amount of food necessary for good health is a moral vice and that it is virtuous to be good at mathematics; we shall also be surprised to learn that in Aristotle's opinion the man who overcomes temptation to misbehaviour is not virtuous. Those readers who are not so surprised have probably just failed to assimilate what they read. Now Aristotle did think that there would be something wrong with a person who could not appreciate a good healthy meal, and he did regard mathematical competence as a sign of a good intelligence, and he did think that with good training a person could come not merely to overcome temptation to misbehaviour but to cease to be tempted, and that this was an improvement, but the translations are certainly liable to puzzle and mislead.

No doubt the difficulties caused by translation can be partly removed by better translation; for example, it would be well to remove the words 'virtue' and 'vice' from the translation and replace them by, say, 'excellence' and 'flaw'. But translation, however excellent, can never avoid some degree of difficulty of the kind illustrated above. No doubt all translation is subject to this difficulty, not only translation from Aristotle. But translation of abstract discussions, such as philosophy, must always present special difficulties. If Aristotle could be brought back to life and taught German he would probably find it an impossible task to make head or tail of Kant's ethical works, while to translate Kant into ancient Greek would be quite impossible.

Anthropologists can be very severely tested in their attempts to understand totally alien cultures and thought processes. Ancient Greek thought is not thus totally alien, for Hellenic influences on our culture are as basic as those of Judaism and Christianity; but, nonetheless, Greek texts can present problems of the same type as those faced by anthropologists, and we must always be wary lest we reinterpret them in the light of more recent thought.

A third main difficulty in understanding the *Nicomachean Ethics* arises from the nature of the text itself. Very few competent critics have ever doubted that, with the exception of a few editorial phrases of no importance, the work is a genuine representation of Aristotle's thought. But, even more evidently in the Greek than in most translations, it is not a finished and continuous literary text. How it came to be as it is nobody knows. A plausible guess is that it is a set of notes written by Aristotle as a basis for his lectures, and perhaps intended to be deposited in the school library for consultation by members. Indications of this are such expressions in the text as 'as we also said the other day' (1104b 18) and 'as can be gathered from the diagram' (1107a 33), which diagram was presumably written on the Greek equivalent of a blackboard, since there is no diagram in the text. There are also cryptic allusions such as that to the man who let fly with a catapult when he intended only to display it (1111a 10), which would presumably have been expanded in a lecture. Others have, less plausibly in my view, conjectured that what we have is lecture notes by a member of the audience; we have no source for any opinion on this topic save conjecture.

It is very hard to doubt that the text is by Aristotle, but it very clearly was not written as a continuous unity, which is another source of difficulty. Thus Books V, VI and VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are also Books IV, V and VI of the *Eudemian Ethics* and stylistic evidence suggests that they were originally part of the *Eudemian Ethics*. A possible explanation is that Aristotle revised some topics and not others, so that editors made the unrevised portion part of two otherwise different editions. That editors did join together into a whole manuscripts of Aristotle not so unified by him himself is quite evident. Thus the last few chapters of Book VII are on pleasure and end with the words: 'It remains for

us to discuss friendship'. Friendship is duly discussed in books VIII and IX, while Book IX ends with the words: 'The next thing to discuss is pleasure', and pleasure receives a treatment at the beginning of Book X which is quite independent of that in Book VII. It is plausible to conjecture that pious editors thus roughly put together manuscripts of the great man which they were unwilling to abandon.

Classical scholars have a fine time arguing the details of these matters. We need merely note that the text is not a unity and accept the common verdict that the text of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is all genuine Aristotle, though not a single treatise. All professional philosophers have written separate papers and revised lecture notes on different aspects of their subject, and have often treated the same theme two or three times. If the books on friendship were originally an independent essay, while the *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian Ethics* were alternative treatments of the same subject matter which editors posthumously conflated in part, nobody should be surprised.

Thus, apart from the inherent difficulties of the subject matter, the text may be difficult to understand from any one, or any combination of, the three causes that have been outlined above. It may be that the text presupposes unfamiliar concepts and cultural outlooks; it may be that the translation misleads us; it may be that Aristotle himself fails to give us the explanations and clarifications that we could reasonably expect from a unitary text prepared by the author for publication. The remedies for these difficulties, though not always easy to apply, are plain. The concepts and cultural presuppositions, even if at times somewhat unfamiliar, are neither mysterious nor ineffable. They can be described and explained. Where translations tend to be opaque or misleading, paraphrase and alternative translations can be helpful. Where the text is cryptic and overconcise, we can draw on our familiarity with Aristotle's thought, on parallel texts and the wisdom of generations of commentators. There will remain passages the meaning of which, to me at least, will still be doubtful. But on the whole an original, penetrating and substantial body of thought can be elicited from the text of the *Nicomachean Ethics* which is well worth the labour involved in coming to understand it.

Finally, a note for the curious on the name 'Nicomachean Ethics'. Aristotle had a son named Nicomachus, who was still a child when his father died and is said to have been killed young in battle; he is not known to have been a philosopher. What connexion this fact has with the title is not known. The French call the work *L'Ethique à Nicomaque*, thus suggesting that the work was addressed or dedicated to his infant son by its author; the cover of the *World's Classics* edition says that the work was 'so called after their first editor, Aristotle's son Nicomachus', which is an implausible conjecture without any evidence to support it. In fact, nobody knows why the work is called the *Nicomachean Ethics*, just as nobody knows why the *Eudemian Ethics* is so called, though it is known that Aristotle had a pupil named Eudemus who came from Rhodes.

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The Ideal Life: a Preliminary Discussion

Many Aristotelian texts begin with a vast generalization, and the *Nicomachean Ethics* is one of them. 'Every art, procedure, action and undertaking aims at some good', says Aristotle (1094a 1). We might wish to object to this. More seriously, we might point out that some ends that seem desirable to some people sometimes are in fact bad; Aristotle will deal with that point later on. Less seriously, we might query whether twiddling one's thumbs, and doodling, for example, aim at anything, good or bad. It would therefore be as well to notice at once a warning given by Aristotle early in the *Nicomachean Ethics* on the nature and method of his inquiry (1094b 11). Accuracy, he tells us, is a function of the subject-matter of an inquiry; in mathematics total accuracy and precision is the norm; in many other areas generalizations have to be more or less rough and sketchy, and there will always be exceptions. Thus as generalizations 'It is a good thing to be rich' and 'It is a good thing to be brave' are considered by Aristotle to be obvious truths at the level of accuracy of which ethical discussion is capable; but, as he points out, 'both wealth and bravery can destroy a man' (1094b 16-18). It is, he tells us in one of those pithy observations at which he excels, 'a mark of the educated man to demand accuracy only to the degree that the subject-matter permits' (1094b 24-25). The *Nicomachean Ethics* is an inquiry in a field where all our generalizations must be approximate.

So we can agree with Aristotle that on the whole whatever

people do it will be for the sake of something good, or at least what they think is worth aiming at. The essential point is that generally when a person does something there will be an answer to the question why he is doing it. Action in general is not pointless. But there is an important distinction to be made; some things that we do, we do for their own sake, other things we do in order to bring about something beyond the action itself (1094a 4–5). Perhaps we listen to music, or wander round art galleries because that is the sort of thing we want to do; it is an end in itself. But most people catch trains only in order to reach some destination and make cakes only because they want to eat them. The chain can be much longer; we plough fields in order to grow wheat, which we do to get the grain, which we grind to get flour, which we bake to make bread, which we make in order to eat it. Perhaps we could continue that chain still further; we eat to assuage our hunger, for example. But Aristotle is surely right in claiming that the chain must have a final link that there must be something which is an end desired for its own sake (1094a 21–22).

At this point Aristotle makes a suggestion that causes difficulty: might there not be some end for the sake of which everything is done, at which all action aims? The first difficulty is that it looks suspiciously as if Aristotle moves from the obvious truth, that every action has some end, to the claim that there is some end at which all action aims; this is no more justifiable than the move from 'Every nice girl loves a sailor' to 'There is a sailor whom every nice girl loves'. If we can find no better ground for accepting Aristotle's suggestion, we had better not accept it at all. But a bad argument for a conclusion does not falsify the conclusion.

However, a more potent difficulty is that Aristotle himself has already agreed that there are many things which we do for their own sake and many ulterior ends at which we aim; he has mentioned health, victory and wealth as such ulterior ends in his first few lines, and we surely do not usually listen to music as a means to some further end, though we might listen to a piece of music as a means to passing a music examination. It is important to see how Aristotle can answer this objection, for in seeing this

we shall also see Aristotle's basic reason for thinking that the wise man will have one final end in life. We already have before us the distinction between an activity undertaken for its own sake and one undertaken as a means to some end; we must now make a further distinction and recognize a class of actions that are both ends in themselves and also constituents in (not means to) some wider end.

We might imagine a person who is dancing and who is doing so for its own sake and not, say, purely for health reasons. Let us now consider each individual step in the dance and ask whether it is being performed for its own sake. If we were to say that each step was being taken simply as a means to dancing, it would seem to follow that none of the dance was being done for its own sake. It seems more plausible to say that, just because the dancer is dancing for the sake of dancing, each element in the dance is performed for its own sake. As he performs each motion it will be equally true to say that he is doing it for its own sake or for the sake of dancing. Each movement is an end in itself and a constituent in the dance, which is also the end.

If we recognize this class of activities that are ends in themselves but also constituents in a wider end, the difficulty we raised will disappear and we shall be better placed to understand Aristotle's suggestion. He is suggesting that we may have some widest, all-embracing, end so that the things we do for their own sake are all partially constitutive of that widest end. If that is so, it is worthwhile for us to decide what that all-embracing end should be, for it must be the greatest good of all (1094a 23).

At this stage (1095a 18), Aristotle says that there is such a supreme end and that everyone agrees what it is, so far as words go. They all agree that the right name for it is 'eudaemonia'. This Greek word, now part of the English language, is often translated as 'happiness'; everyone agrees that this translation is misleading, but many accept it because they cannot think of a better. It is safer merely to transliterate and to explain the meaning. This is very easy to do since Aristotle tells us that everyone agrees that 'eudaemonia' means the same as 'living and faring well' (1095a 19–20). So to say that somebody is *eudaemon* is the very same thing as to say that he is living a life worth living. It is

emphatically not to say, as might be the case when one describes somebody as happy, that he is, at the time of speaking, feeling on top of the world, or any other way. To call somebody *eudaemon* is to judge his life as a whole, so that a cautious man, as Solon advised, will not call anybody *eudaemon* until he is dead. This, says Aristotle (1100a 10–15), is not the absurd view that one is never well off while alive, but only when one is in the grave, but the cautious view that it is not safe to judge a life as the sort of life that is worth living until one has seen the whole of it. To call a person *eudaemon* while he is still alive is like calling a book a good book when one has still only read part of it – it is not safe, though, of course, people do it. But, says Aristotle, when one calls a young person *eudaemon* it is a forecast on the basis of a favourable start, not a final judgment (1100a 1–4). It is clear that this notion of *eudaemonia* is different from ours of happiness.

But if to be *eudaemon* is to live a good life, we must not interpret this saying as a moral judgment. Aristotle himself does hold that the best life will be one which, among other things, exhibits excellence of character. But to be *eudaemon* is to be well off, to have what is most desirable, not to be praiseworthy. Just as a games player will probably find his games more satisfying if he plays without cheating, so with life as a whole. The notion of being of good character even though one's life is thereby circumscribed and diminished is not one which any Greek held.

If one lives a moral life one is, no doubt, to be praised. If one lives the *eudaemon* life one is to be congratulated. Aristotle frequently makes the distinction between what is to be prized and what is to be praised (e.g. 1101b 10), and *eudaemonia* is to be prized. It is a success, an achievement. If one asks the question of the modern moralist: 'How ought I to live?' one is not asking Aristotle's question: 'What is the *eudaemon* life?'. Aristotle's question requires an answer more like that required to the question asked of a parent: 'What sort of life do you hope for your children?' Parents, in general, want their children to succeed in life, though they have different views of what constitutes success. So had the Greeks.

Once the nature of the inquiry becomes clear we can understand why Aristotle is so certain that there must be one

single final end of life and does not bother to argue the case with any care. The decisive point is this: let us imagine an objector who claims that *eudaemonia* would be improved if we added to it the element X, so that the double end of *eudaemonia* plus X would be superior to the single end of *eudaemonia*. Aristotle's answer to this would be that this is merely a misleading way of saying that X is an element in *eudaemonia*. So, if we envisage the ideal life, omitting nothing that could improve it, we have envisaged *eudaemonia*; so how could there be a further end? Certainly we want honour, pleasure and every possible excellence, says Aristotle, and we want them for their own sake (1097b 2). But, since they are, in Aristotle's own words, 'parts of *eudaemonia*' (1129b 18), we can also say that we want them in order to live the ideal life, whereas it would be absurd to say that we want to live the ideal life in order to achieve anything else. *Eudaemonia* is the one thing we not only choose for its own sake but cannot choose for the sake of anything else (1097b 1).

Thus it is clear that *eudaemonia* is not just one element in the ideal life. It is clear also that *eudaemonia* is composite; the ideal life is not made ideal by just one element that it contains, but has multiple criteria or desiderata. Aristotle, whose feet were on earth and whose head, despite his intellectual eminence, was not in the clouds, even holds that one cannot be altogether *eudaemon* if one is very ugly, lowborn, solitary or childless (1095b 2–5). One also needs money (1099a 31–34). Certainly pleasure, friendship and all human excellences are requisite. Aristotle even entertains the possibility that what happens after one's death can affect one's *eudaemonia*, not because one may suffer in hell or rejoice in heaven, or even because one might beyond the grave be aware of what goes on in the world, but because nobody would want to be the sort of person whose children turn out to be rascals, even after one's death (1100a 10–30).

The point that the ideal is complex is well made in the *Magna Moralia*, a work traditionally ascribed to Aristotle, though many doubt its authenticity. The perspicacious author of the *Magna Moralia*, whoever he may be, wrote: 'But the ideal that we are now seeking is not simple. For example, someone might say that wisdom is the greatest of all goods, taken separately. But perhaps

we should not seek the highest good in that way. For we are seeking the complete good, and wisdom on its own is incomplete'. We find also in the *Magna Moralia* the sentence: 'For eudaemonia is a composite of certain good things. For eudaemonia is nothing apart from these, but these'. Whoever the author, this is sound Aristotelian doctrine.

I have laboured this point because Aristotle sometimes talks as though he did wish to identify eudaemonia with that one element, wisdom, that the *Magna Moralia* says is not the ideal but is, on its own, incomplete. Thus he begins Chapter 6 of Book X by saying that, after discussing excellence, friendship and pleasure, the time has come to discuss eudaemonia in outline (1176a 30–32), and he ends Chapter VIII with the judgment that the life of contemplative thought is the most *eudaimon* (1178a 6–7). He also speaks of the life in which one gives scope to the exercise of excellences of character and practical wisdom as a second best (1178a 9–10). This has, not surprisingly, caused puzzlement and led to charges of inconsistency against Aristotle. Does he, it is asked, wish to make eudaemonia the inclusive or the dominant end of life? But I think that the explanation is quite simple and that there is no real inconsistency. The elements in eudaemonia, as conceived by Aristotle, are compatible with and desirable in any sort of life. High birth, good looks and the like may be more important to the politician than to the scholar, but are not to be despised by anybody. But certain life styles are incompatible; one might hanker after being a great musician, a great Aristotelian scholar or a prime minister. None of these are unworthy ambitions, but they are not compatible and one must choose; Paderewski's piano playing deteriorated when he became prime minister of Poland and Gladstone's philosophical work is sparse and mediocre. Some choices determine one's whole way of life and exclude many others. Aristotle's view is that a life of public activity and a life of intellectual contemplation are the two main contenders for the place of the best life style and that one has to choose. The one gives scope to practical excellence, the other to theoretical excellence. He makes his choice; one may not agree with it, but I do not think that he is guilty of inconsistency. One can, perhaps, complain that he did not make

things clearer, but any criticism should be suspended until one has seen his grounds for coming to the final conclusion in Book X.

So much for our explanation of the notion of eudaemonia, which Aristotle tells us is agreed by everyone to be the name of the best kind of life and means the same as to live and fare well. But he goes on immediately (1095a 20–22) to say that they disagree about what it is, and to mention some current views, such as that it is pleasure or honour. Commentators have puzzled much over the interpretation of this question. 'What is eudaemonia?' is a question in the standard form: 'What is X?' in which Aristotle asks for a definition – in the sense in which he uses the word so translated. If we confuse an Aristotelian definition with what we now call a definition – a formula giving the meaning of a word to be defined – we shall properly be puzzled, since Aristotle has already told us that everyone agrees that 'eudaemonia' means the same as 'living and faring well'. Moreover Aristotle tells us that some people believe that the answer to the question: 'What is eudaemonia?' is 'Honour'; but nobody could suppose that 'honour' means the same as 'eudaemonia'. Our puzzlement will vanish if we recognize that an Aristotelian definition is not intended to give the meaning of a word.

An Aristotelian definition is not anything very mysterious, though the traditional formula that it gives the essence of the thing defined sounds very portentous. Perhaps it would be better to say that a definition tells us what the thing defined really is. Let us consider one of the examples that Aristotle uses when explaining definition in his *Analytics*. What is an eclipse? Everyone knows the meaning of the word – an eclipse is the temporary ending of the light of the sun or of the moon. But it remains sensible to ask: 'What is an eclipse?' To this question some have thought that the correct answer was that the moon had been swallowed by a dragon. But Greek astronomers had discovered that an eclipse (of the moon) was the interposition of the earth between the sun and the moon. This, Aristotle tells us; is the definition of an eclipse. So in this case the definition is given not, of course, by the lexicographer, nor by a meta-

physician with some mysterious insight, but by a scientist. So it seems that the answer required to the question: 'What is an eclipse?' will have the nature of an explanation, one that gives us an understanding of the phenomenon – not of the word, which we have already.

Not all 'What is X?' questions will require a scientific answer. 'What is a good motor car?' can be answered well only by somebody with technological competence, but is not a scientific, or even a technological, question. The answer to it will enable us to judge and choose between motor cars. 'What is eudaemonia?' is in some respects a similar question. It is a demand for the criteria by which to judge and choose between different kinds of life. To answer the question well we need to be able to think philosophically, but it is not a theoretical but a practical problem. How to set about answering the question we shall find out, according to Aristotle, by reading the *Ethics*.

The first clue on how to set about answering the question is given at 1095b 2–9. There is a procedure from first principles, where we start from perhaps very abstract axioms or fundamental truths, which may be difficult to understand and remote from everyday thought, but which are self-evident in the sense that they require and admit no prior justification; we then draw conclusions from these and end up with something quite specific with which we are already familiar. Thus, perhaps, starting from the abstract first principles of Newtonian mechanics we deduce that an apple will fall to the ground when no longer attached to its tree. But there is another sort of procedure in which we move towards first principles and start from what is familiar to us. It would seem that this is how Newton got to his first principles, and it is hard to imagine how else he would have arrived at them. In ethical inquiries, Aristotle tells us, we have to start in this second way from what is familiar to us.

But in ethics we cannot start from visible occurrences, such as apples falling from trees, for we are concerned with values and not with simple empirical facts. What we have to start from, he tells us, is what is said about conduct by everyone, or by the majority, or by the wise (Book I, Chapter 8 *passim*). These current views may, on reflection, need to be clarified, guarded,

modified and, when they disagree with one another, reconciled. But rather as J.S. Mill thought it absurd to deny that what everybody desired was desirable, so Aristotle accepted common assent as cogent in ethical enquiries. 'What seems true to everyone, that we say is the case' (1173a 1).

We can find a parallel, in spite of the difference between modern and ancient philosophy, in modern moral philosophy. There are those who, following Aristotle's first procedure from first principles, construct a moral system on the basis of some basic principle which they claim to be luminously self-evident. If commonly accepted moral beliefs do not accord with the system, then they need to be reformed. Such has been the practice of many utilitarians, who start from a principle of maximization of general welfare and regard all other moral principles and decisions as subordinate to and derivable from it. On the other hand, there are those who regard the job of the moral philosopher as being to take the common moral consensus as the datum and to endeavour to set out what order and system they can find in the various judgements of the unphilosophical moral agents around them. Aristotle is not constructing a moral philosophy in the modern sense; but there is a parallel between the procedure that he advocates and that of the latter type of moral philosopher.

Such at least is Aristotle's professed method, and it is one that he follows most of the time. He even goes so far as to say: 'For if difficulties are resolved and accepted opinions remain, that is sufficient demonstration' (1145b 6–7). We shall often find him, however, going beyond this cautious goal. We shall also find him using an occasional *a priori* argument, though when he does so he is always careful to show that the conclusion so arrived at is supported by accepted beliefs.

Most of the rest of Book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is devoted to giving not a complete but a preliminary answer to this question: 'What is eudaemonia?' which is the central question that Aristotle sets out to answer in this work. It might even be held that it is not even an outline answer, but rather an indication of how and where the answer is to be sought. In one of the formulations of this answer we are told that the good for man is 'activity of the soul exhibiting the highest and most complete

excellence in a complete life' (1098a 15–18). This answer, which certainly requires elucidation in the translation I have given it, is made more difficult and even misleading in the standard translations, which make Aristotle say that the good for man is 'activity in accordance with virtue' instead of 'activity exhibiting excellence'. What Aristotle is saying is not that the central element in eudaemonia is activity that remains within the bounds of morality, but that a life devoted to even the most worthwhile activities carried out rather badly will be less choiceworthy than one in which the same activities are conducted at the peak of efficiency. If playing snooker were to turn out to be the most worthwhile of all human activities, it would be best to be a first-class snooker player. Aristotle's own illustration is that if one is going to play the aulos (a reedpipe), one had better play it well (1098a 9–10). Aristotle is, in Book X, going to single out contemplation of immutable truth as the most worthwhile of all activities. One cannot carry out this activity either virtuously or viciously; but one can do it better or worse, and it is more worthwhile to do it better.

But in Book I Aristotle does not claim only that the central criterion of eudaemonia, the good life, is the activities that it includes; he also tells us that these activities will involve the use of reason (1098a 13–15). So the most complete preliminary account of eudaemonia will be that it is activity involving the use of reason, at a high level of excellence and throughout a complete life. We must remember, of course, that there are always subsidiary considerations, such as good looks and others mentioned at 1099b 3–5.

If we examine the reasons that Aristotle gives for this account of eudaemonia, we shall find that for the most part they are common-sense and widely held considerations. We shall note three of them:

- 1 The worthwhileness of a type of life must depend on the actions it contains rather than merely on the abilities and character that it manifests. A life of a person who had the most excellent disposition but who was always asleep like Rip van Winkle would not be worth much.

- 2 We think that the value of a man's life is largely in his own power to determine. Many of the things that happen to a man for better or worse are out of his control; but he can to a great extent choose his own actions. So if eudaemonia is to be, short of calamities, within our power to achieve, it should depend largely on our actions.
- 3 The three types of life commonly put forward as candidates for supremacy are the life of sensual pleasure, the life of involvement in the affairs of one's country and the life of theoretical contemplation. The first of these is the aim of a mere animal; the other two must include activity involving the use of reason, either practical or theoretical.

These three considerations, and some others mentioned by Aristotle, are all designed to show that his preliminary account of eudaemonia fits in with our common beliefs; they are of the second type mentioned by Aristotle, moving towards, rather than from first principles. But there is a further argument of a more metaphysical type which is liable, perhaps with good reason, to worry the modern reader. This is an argument based on the claim that man has a function. This function is then said to be the use of reason, so that the life that does not include the fulfilment of this function will be incomplete and imperfect. From this it is concluded that the best life must be one of rational activity. This argument is to be found at 1097b 23–1098a 10.

This argument meets with two kinds of objection. The first of these objections denies that man has a function. Aristotle says (1097b 25–28) that if the aulos player and the sculptor have functions, as they clearly do, then surely man must have one too. But the obvious reply is that 'sculptor' is indeed a functional term, like 'screwdriver' or 'steering wheel', but 'man', 'horse' and the like are not functional terms. Man may use the horse for certain purposes, but this shows only that man is the imperialist of the animal kingdom, not that the horse, of its own nature, has a function to fulfill.

This objection, even when put thus briefly, is perhaps irresistible, but we can perhaps try to appreciate Aristotle's viewpoint. As a biologist, Aristotle had come to the conclusion

that nature is purposive. We can, he thinks, inquire into the function of the heart, the liver, the kidneys or the eye and expect to find an answer; none of these organs are mere useless superfluities. But while man, in common with all other animals has a heart, kidneys, liver, eyes and the like, he alone has the capacity to reason. This distinguishing feature cannot be a mere useless superfluity either; it is what makes a person distinctively human and so the fully human life must include it. This purposive view of nature is, of course, frowned on nowadays by theorists of scientific method, though if we are honest we may find it hard to claim that it is entirely absent from our own thought.

The second of the common objections mentioned above is that even if we accept that a perfect specimen of a human life must include the use of reason, this will show only that this is the good of man not the good for man. Man, it is suggested, might be better off if he were to neglect his distinctively human capacities. If Aristotle is claiming to provide a deductive proof that reason is part of the best life he has, perhaps, no answer to this objection. But I think that Aristotle would answer that a life that left out this distinctively human activity of reasoning would be the choice of men 'slavish in their tastes, preferring a life suitable to beasts' (1095b 19-20). Like Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* he would say:

For who would lose,
Though full of pain, this intellectual being,
These thoughts that wander through eternity.

It is, however, clear that this reply cannot on its own justify the very central role that Aristotle will assign to reason and contemplation in the final chapters of the *Nicomachean Ethics*; Aristotle will bring forward new arguments to that conclusion which we must evaluate when we come to them.

From this preliminary sketch of eudaemonia, according to which its central criterion is activity exhibiting excellence and involving the use of reason, the bulk of the rest of the *Nicomachean Ethics* derives. The key terms are 'action', 'excellence'

and 'reason': in Book II Aristotle will discuss excellence of character; in the first part of Book III and again in the earlier part of Book VII he will discuss action and responsibility; in the latter part of Book III and in Books IV and V he will discuss particular excellences of character such as bravery and justice; in Book VI he discusses excellence in reasoning, both theoretical and practical.

Aristotle recognizes three types of human excellence: bodily excellence, excellence of character and excellence of intelligence. Bodily excellence is, as we have seen, to at least some degree essential to eudaemonia, for if one is ugly or diseased one is impaired to some degree. But bodily excellence is a topic for biological and medical study rather than having a place in an ethical work, so Aristotle does not discuss it in detail in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The other two types of excellence he does discuss in detail. If eudaemonia is predominantly determined by activity displaying excellence, Aristotle will first examine the nature and varieties of human excellence and then, finally in Book X, consider what activity or activities should be central in the best human life.

Both types of excellence, that of character and that of intelligence, fall within the rational life of man and are within the sphere where choice is possible. Excellences of intelligence, such as planning ability and theoretical insight, are rational eminently and in themselves; excellences of character, though in themselves not forms of intelligence, not, as Aristotle himself puts it, excellences of the rational but of a non-rational part of the soul, still 'listen to reason' (1102b 30). By listening to reason excellence of character differs from bodily excellence. To use a biblical example, 'no man by taking thought can add one cubit to his stature', nor can he decide to become better looking or more healthy, though he might decide to visit a cosmetic surgeon or change his diet in the hope that improved looks or health will result. But we can decide to become more abstemious in bodily indulgence, we can decide to behave well or badly and in general to behave in accordance with the dictates of reason. So in studying excellence of action we shall have to study its two distinguishable but inseparable aspects, excellence of disposition or character and that kind of thinking which is concerned with

and controls (or should control) our choices. Aristotle will study excellence of character first, and while reading that study we must never forget that it is only one element in good action. A study of excellence of character does not try to answer the question what is the best way to act or the question how we should make our choice of action; it is concerned only with the question what sort of character is needed if sound choices are to be made. Only thought can determine what course of action is best on any occasion; excellence of character has the sole, but important, role of making the agent willing to do what reason determines is the best course of action. If we remember this, Aristotle's account of excellence of character and his celebrated doctrine of the mean will present no difficulty, except on a few points of detail. If we forget it, and most traditional accounts of the matter do forget it, we shall totally misunderstand both the account and the doctrine.

APPENDIX

Our discussion of the central topics of Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* has completely ignored Chapter 6. The reason for this is that this difficult and often obscure discussion of Platonic doctrine is purely negative and contributes nothing to Aristotle's positive thesis. Since it is famous and not without interest a little will be said about it now; but this section of the chapter can be passed over by those who so wish without detriment to their understanding of Aristotle's own doctrines.

In Books V and VI of Plato's *Republic* the class of Guardians is said to live the most *eudaemon* life possible, and the supreme element in their *eudaemonia* is said to be their attainment, after long and arduous preparation, of the vision of the form of the good. Chapter 6 of Book I is an attack on this view. As Aristotle understands him, at least, Plato regards the forms as self-subsistent paradigms, prior to, separate from and more real than the empirical world which is only a copy or reflection of them. Aristotle does not deny merely the existence of such a form of the good; he denies that there are any forms answering to this

description. According to Aristotle, the form or universal, like matter, is an abstraction from the only true reality, which is a composite of matter and form. Thus the shape or form of a piece of wax cannot exist independently of the wax or some other matter, nor can the piece of wax exist without displaying some form or other.

Aristotle's serious attacks on the separate, paradigmatic form are to be found in his *Metaphysics*, and there is little, if anything, in Chapter 6 that adds to them. The interest of this chapter lies elsewhere. In general, Aristotle would agree with Plato that, when we call a set of things by the same name, it is because they share a single universal form. Thus all red things exhibit the same universal redness and all men exhibit the form of humanity. Aristotle merely denies that there is a form of red or a form of man that is a paradigm existing independently of the individuals that exhibit them. But in this chapter he denies, not merely that there is a separate Platonic form of the good, but even that there is a single universal goodness that is exhibited by all good things, a much more radical claim.

Aristotle's arguments to this effect are obscure in detail and depend on his doctrine of categories in their formulation. Basically, what he claims is that a good substance, such as God, a good quality, such as wisdom, a good quantity, and so on through the categories, are utterly disparate in their nature. Substance, quality and quantity are ultimate types of being and do not share a common character. There is no single universal being and no single universal goodness. Perhaps an analogy from time and place, two other Aristotelian categories, may help understanding. We may speak of a long time and of a long distance; but it is not clear that there is one single sort of length that can be ascribed to both a time and a distance. If we can understand a denial of this, perhaps we shall also understand why Aristotle thinks that when we call God good and the weather good we are not attributing a common characteristic to them.

Thus the term 'good', like the term 'being' is not univocal. But Aristotle recognizes that to call both a quality and a quantity good is not a mere pun, as when we call both a blow and a certain party drink a punch. He suggests intermediate possibilities: 'Are

goods one, then, by being derived from one good or by all contributing to one good, or are they rather one by analogy?' (1096b 26–28). These obscure sounding phrases are easily explained in the light of Aristotle's other writings. Being derived from one case can be exemplified by the term 'healthy'. A healthy person, a healthy diet and a healthy complexion do not exhibit a common characteristic, 'health'. But there is no pun involved; the central case, the person and the others are all called healthy because the diet contributes to and the complexion manifests the health of the person. 'All contributing to one good' is the same thing looked at from the other end; the diet and the complexion contribute, each in its own way, to the health of the person.

The notion of analogy is one that became very important in mediaeval theology. 'Analogy' is a Greek mathematical term for what we call proportion, such as $a:b :: c:d$. The classic illustration is that we can speak both of the foot of a man and the foot of a mountain because, in spite of their manifest dissimilarities, the foot of the mountain stands in the same relation to the mountain as the foot of the man stands to the man. Aristotle does not tell us in detail how these suggestions are to be applied to the case of goodness; he merely points out that pure synonymy and pure homonymy are not the only two possibilities to consider.

Aristotle's preliminary remark in this chapter that it is distasteful to attack the theory of forms because it was introduced by friends seems somewhat belied by the style of his discussion. At one place in the *Metaphysics* he says that to call forms paradigms and to say that things participate in them is 'empty verbiage and poetic metaphor'. Aristotle does not seem to try very hard to pull his punches.

2

Excellence of Character

One of the main topics discussed in Plato's ethical dialogues, notably the *Meno*, is how excellence (or virtue, as the translations usually say) is acquired. Especially the question asked is whether it can be taught. Aristotle begins Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics* with a dogmatic, but clearly correct, answer to the question which well illustrates his very frequent way of solving problems by making distinctions. Excellences of intelligence, he says, are largely acquired by teaching; excellences of character, being nonrational, cannot be taught but are acquired by training (the translations often say 'by habituation', but excellence of character is not a mere matter of habit, such as putting on one sock before another when dressing). We have, of course, to be born with the relevant capacities if we are to acquire excellences, whether of character or of intelligence, as most men to some degree are, but the excellence has to be developed.

We must not misunderstand this. Aristotle does not mean that we are born bad, antisocial, creatures of original sin, and that training will convert us from being bad into being good. Aristotle believes that we are born without any character at all. If we are normal human beings and not naturally incapacitated by some abnormal defect, then whether we acquire a good or a bad character depends on the kind of upbringing we get. He is evidently more impressed by the effects of environment than those of heredity, though in Book X he acknowledges that we can be better or worse disposed to respond to good training, as different soils better or worse nourish the seed (1179b 20–26).

Aristotle compares acquiring a good character with acquiring a skill. Paradoxical though it may sound, one learns to play the piano by playing the piano, and to ride a bicycle by riding one. Before one has acquired the art or skill one acts in accordance with the instructions of a teacher, who tells us what to do, and one does it with effort. Gradually, by practice and repetition, it becomes effortless and second nature. In the same way, one is trained as a child (if lucky in one's parents and teachers) to become truthful, generous, fair and the like by being told how to behave well and encouraged to do so. Parents supply the intelligence and experience that one has not yet developed, and with practice and repetition it becomes easier and easier to follow their counsel. A child who has been trained to share his toys with his friends finds it easier and easier to do so; the child who has not been so trained will find it hard and will resent having to do so. Such is Aristotle's view, and surely he is right. At the same time, he believes, one's practical intelligence will develop so that one will less and less need parents and guardians to tell one how to behave in various circumstances; one will come to see for oneself. Aristotle also echoes Plato, mentioning him by name (1104b 12), in insisting that correct training is not coercion. If properly trained one comes to enjoy doing things the right way, to want to do things the right way, and to be distressed by doing things wrongly.

We must now notice a very important sentence from Chapter 3 of Book II, first in a typical translation, then in my own. It is the passage from 1104b 13–16:

If the virtues are concerned with actions and passions, and every passion and every action is accompanied by pleasure and pain, for this reason also virtue will be concerned with pleasures and pains.
(Ross)

If excellences are concerned with actions and emotions, and every emotion and every action involves liking or dislike, for this reason excellence will be concerned with one's likes and dislikes.
(J.O.U.)

Ross's translation is not, of course, wrong, but it can mislead the unwary. What Aristotle is saying is that whether one has an

excellent character or not depends not merely on what one does but also on what one likes doing. If a person acts generously there may be many explanation, some discreditable; if one regularly acts generously because one likes acting generously, if one is emotionally inclined towards generosity, then one has an excellent character in this area of action. So character depends rather on what one likes doing, what one enjoys doing, what one wants to do, than merely on what one does. The man of excellent character will act effortlessly in the correct way; he will not have to make himself so act.

Here we have one more reason for preferring to talk of excellence of character rather than of moral virtue. An illustration will help to make the point clear. Let us suppose that Brown is a strong, healthy, extrovert, full of self-confidence. He is at a meeting where a course of action which he believes to be wrong is very popular with the majority; he speaks out against the policy and has no difficulty in doing so. Let us suppose that Smith, a shy, retiring, hesitant person, is also at the meeting and also disapproves of the popular view. He can bring himself to speak out against it only by a great and very disagreeable effort of will. Perhaps we may agree that Smith is the man who has displayed the moral virtue of courage; if you were to compliment Brown on his courage he would not have the faintest idea what you were talking about. But for Aristotle, Brown is the man who has excellence of character; he is the man who acts effortlessly and as he wants to act, without any internal friction. Aristotle is not making a hopelessly wrong judgment about moral virtue; he is raising a different sort of question. The excellent character is that which a man will have who lives the most *eudaimon* life, the most choiceworthy life. If we were to ask, not for what sort of person do we feel most moral respect, but what sort of person we should wish a child of ours to be, we shall be nearer to Aristotle's viewpoint. He thinks a parent should aim to train his or her children to behave properly without effort.

Another way in which the rendering of Aristotle's text as saying that moral virtue is concerned with pleasures and pains is liable to mislead is this. There is, indeed, one area of excellence of character which is properly concerned with pleasure, tem-

perance, and one concerned with pain, endurance. The temperate man enjoys, likes, wants sensual pleasure (food, drink, sex) only to the degree appropriate and the man of endurance does not flinch from pain when the situation demands that he endure it. No doubt it is going too far to say that he enjoys it (remember that Aristotle is speaking generally and in outline), but he does not want to act otherwise in spite of the pain; there is no internal conflict. So on the whole we are less liable to misinterpret Aristotle if we use the language of likes, enjoyment, wants, and their contraries rather than that of pleasure and pain when talking of excellence of character in general and not specifically of temperance.

But, the reader may well ask, surely it is possible for us, like the imaginary Smith voicing unpopular views with difficulty, to act properly when we do not want to, and has Aristotle forgotten this? Aristotle has not forgotten this, and there is a careful discussion of this possibility in Book VII. Perhaps Aristotle would have been more helpful to us had he not postponed his discussion of this possibility to so late in the work – if indeed the arrangement of the work is his.

So excellence of character is a settled disposition to want to act and to act in a way appropriate to the situation. What way is appropriate must, of course, be determined by reason; excellence of character can merely ensure willing compliance with the requirements of practical thinking. But Aristotle has more to tell us about excellence of character; most importantly, there is his celebrated doctrine of the mean, which is part of his definition of excellence of character, and it is to the doctrine of the mean that we shall not turn our attention.

Few philosophical theories have been more frequently and more grossly misunderstood, in my opinion, than the doctrine of the mean. Readers are therefore warned that the exposition that they find here will most probably differ greatly from those they will find in other commentaries; they should read Aristotle's text and decide for themselves who is right in their understanding of it. Most conspicuously, the doctrine of the mean has been interpreted as being a doctrine of moderation – the thesis that extremes are to be avoided and that the middle way is the safest.

Unless Aristotle is guilty of a very serious mistake, basic and not in detail, this interpretation must be totally wrong. For Aristotle, as he repeatedly makes clear, excellence of character is a willingness to act in whatever way practical reason requires, and the doctrine of the mean is part of Aristotle's formal definition of excellence of character. But the doctrine of moderation, however interpreted in detail, is clearly a principle determining what action is appropriate on each occasion; as such, it is clearly, if correct, a deliverance of practical thinking and not an attribute of character. Thus, if the doctrine of the mean were a thesis of moderation, it would be guilty of confusing excellence of character with that practical wisdom which, Aristotle repeatedly says, must guide our deliberations and our actions.

Moreover, the doctrine of moderation, while reasonable enough at a crude practical level (like 'keep your cool' or 'don't fly off the handle'), if not taken literally, is hard to interpret to make philosophical sense. Surely we are not supposed to exhibit a moderate amount of fear, anger and every other emotion whenever we act? Clearly the right amount of most emotions to display on most occasions is zero. Does it, then, say that when a display of anger is appropriate we should always be moderately angry? But the suggestion that we should be moderately angry when faced with a trivial slight and when witnessing wanton cruelty is absurd; there are occasions on which we cannot be too angry, just as there are occasions when, at most, a slight degree of annoyance is in order.

So the thesis of moderation, or any other account of the doctrine of the mean that makes it a device for deciding how to act, can have nothing to do with the Aristotelian view put forward in the *Ethics*. We must look for another interpretation, which is not hard to find if we take Aristotle to mean what he says.

The doctrine of the mean is part of the definition of excellence of character. Though Aristotle holds that the aim of his ethical work is practical and not to discover what excellence of character is (1108b 27), he clearly thinks that theoretical understanding contributes to that practical end, for in Chapter 5 of Book II he raises the question 'What is excellence of character?'. This is the

regular formula for a demand for a definition of the Aristotelian type. A definition of this type should be constructed by first determining the genus of the thing to be defined, or, less technically, by determining to what wide class of things it belongs and then determining its specific difference, or, less technically, by determining how what is to be defined differs from everything else in the genus. Thus the famous Aristotelian definition of man as a rational animal places man in the genus *animal* and then differentiates him from all other sorts of animal by his rationality. We shall find that Aristotle gives a definition of excellence of character strictly in accordance with this theory.

Having asked the question what excellence of character is, Aristotle has little difficulty in showing that it is a disposition or settled state. Moreover in Chapter 5 he has told us that it is a settled disposition with regard to the feeling and displaying of emotions. Any action that displays character at all, he holds, will involve the display of some emotion, such as 'desire, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, friendliness, hatred, longing, emulation, pity' (1105b 20-21); no doubt he would agree that actions undertaken as part of a long chain of means will often display emotion only indirectly, but there must always be the basic emotional drive. Anger, or any other emotion, is not in itself either an excellence or a defect of character, but a settled state with regard to exhibiting it will be an excellence if it is a disposition to act in a way directed by sound practical wisdom, a defect if it is a disposition towards improper action. The states of character are distinguished as being specific excellences or defects according to the emotion involved: bravery and cowardice are an excellence and a defect displayed in relation to the emotion fear, even and hot temper are so related to anger, temperance and gluttony to appetite for food, and so on. Excellences and defects are distinguished by the emotions they display.

'So we have stated to what genus excellence of character belongs' (1106a 13); it is a settled state or disposition. But there are many settled states, and not a few settled states of character with regard to the emotions, of which excellence of character is only one. So, not surprisingly, Aristotle immediately recognizes that he must go on to say how excellence of character differs from

other states of character. 'But we must not merely say that it is a disposition, but also what sort of disposition' (1106b 14-15); Aristotle must complete the definition by stating the difference. The doctrine of the mean provides this completion.

It will be helpful if we know in advance what other states of character Aristotle recognizes; if he were to recognize only one – badness of character – it could be very simply distinguished from excellence; but in fact he recognizes many more. Unfortunately, Aristotle has not yet mentioned any of these other states of character except in passing, which is perhaps a defect in his order of exposition. But he does give a list at the beginning of Book VII, where he distinguishes six states, divisible into three contrary pairs. One of the pairs is formed by, on the one hand, a super-human excellence which might be called heroic, and is attributable only to the gods; its contrary is a sub-human beastliness indicative of disease or madness – the sort of state which in modern times might lead to the criminal lunatic asylum rather than the prison. As super-human and sub-human, these are perhaps not really states of human character at all, and I shall say no more about them. Aristotle himself says very little about these conditions. Another of these contrary pairs is excellence of character and badness of character. But there is also a third pair of contraries, one of which might be called strength of will or self-control, the other weakness of will or lack of self-control. These states characterize the man who needs and tries to make himself act properly, unlike the man of excellent character who acts properly without any difficulty; the one who succeeds in making himself so act is the strong-willed man, and the one who tries and fails is weak willed.

Thus, if we may neglect the super- and sub-human in studying human excellence, we have four states of character that need to be distinguished from one other. In order of decreasing merit, they are:

- (1) Excellence of character: the state of the man who wants to act appropriately and does so without internal friction.
- (2) Strength of will: the state of the man who wants to act improperly but makes himself act properly.

- (3) Weakness of will: the state of the man who wants to act improperly, tries to make himself act properly, and fails.
- (4) Badness of character: the state of the man who wants to act improperly, who thinks it an excellent idea so to do, and does so without internal friction.

We can illustrate the situation with a sort of table:

	<i>Want</i>	<i>Aim</i>	<i>Act</i>
Excellence	Good	Good	Good
Strength	Bad	Good	Good
Weakness	Bad	Good	Bad
Badness	Bad	Bad	Bad

Thus these four states can be distinguished from each other in so far as no two display the same merit in both the emotional want, the aim or choice settled on after deliberation, and in action. The four states could get a modern illustration from the even-tempered man who has no difficulty in waiting coolly in a traffic jam, the hot-tempered man who successfully restrains himself, the hot-tempered man who tries to remain calm but cannot and the man who curses and hoots at all and sundry with complete self-approval.

So it appears that Aristotle thinks that no emotion is, in itself, either good or bad; what is good or bad is a disposition to display emotions appropriately or inappropriately. It would be foreign to Aristotle's teleological view of nature to allow that we are naturally endowed with emotions that should never be exhibited or felt. What we still need is some further clarification of the notion of propriety, and that is what Aristotle gives us in the doctrine of the mean. Aristotle holds that excellence of character is a disposition to feel and display the right degree of emotion on each occasion and as the occasion demands, and that this disposition is in a mean between being too much disposed and too little disposed to feel and display each emotion. In the mean one will feel and display each emotion at the right times and not too often or too infrequently, with reference to the right matters, towards the right people, for the right reason and in the right

way. To be inclined to excess will involve such errors as feeling and displaying an emotion in season and out of season, in inappropriate situations, towards people indiscriminately, without good cause and in inappropriate ways. A similar account can be given of being inclined to deficiency.

The abbreviated account of excess and deficiency is simply 'too much' and 'too little'; it is this that has most probably led readers to interpret the doctrine as one of moderation, a view that one must avoid extremes of emotion and action on every occasion. But plenty of passages prove this to be a mistake. Here is one: 'Fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general likes and dislikes may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right time, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of excellence' (1106b 19-23).

Thus there will be, in the traditional terminology, two vices correlated with each virtue, or two types of bad character correlated with each excellence of character, not just one. Aristotle does not think we should accept this just on the basis of the general considerations so far adduced, but should consider the individual excellences and see whether we can find two defects going with each excellence (1107a 28-29). In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he refers us to a table that is missing from the text (1107a 33) but does discuss briefly a few cases. However, a fairly long list is given in the *Eudemian Ethics*, which is reproduced here for convenience:

Irascibility	impassivity	even temper
foolhardiness	cowardice	bravery
shamelessness	touchiness	modesty
intemperance	insensibility	temperance
envy	(nameless)	fair-mindedness
gain	disadvantage	justice
prodigality	meanness	liberality
boastfulness	mock modesty	truthfulness
flattery	churlishness	friendliness

servility	disdain	dignity
vanity	mean spirit	pride
ostentation	unworldliness	magnificence

Not all these examples will be convincing to the modern reader without more ado, but they illustrate the general contention.

We should note, to dispel the ghost of moderation, that excellence of character is explicitly said to be an intermediate disposition towards action (1106b 31) and not a disposition to intermediate action. Extreme action will on some occasions be appropriate and carried out by the man of excellent character. Thus the man whose temper is good will be mildly angry about trifles and enraged by outrages, whereas the irascible man will be excessively angry over trifles and the placid or impassive man may be little or only moderately angered by the worst excesses. To give another modern example: the hot-tempered man will also be liable to rage at the helpless telephonist as well as at the person responsible for letting him down, while the over placid man will just shrug his shoulders. These are illustrations of the many ways in which both excess and deficiency can be exhibited. Simply being too angry or not angry enough on a given occasion are only one way in which excess and deficiency can be exhibited.

It is commonly said that the doctrine of the mean argues that to every virtue there correspond two vices. But, whereas some of the states of character exhibiting excess or defect might be reasonably, if somewhat archaically, called vices, such as intemperance, others could not; some, while flaws in a person's make-up, are barely, if at all, of moral significance. No doubt a person is to some degree badly adjusted if he has no enjoyment in even the simple food necessary for health, or if he is overplacid in temperament, or is too self-effacing; but these are not vices nor even moral misdemeanours. Aristotle is considering that states of character do or do not conduce to the *eudaimon* life, whereas to call a character trait a vice is, in modern English, a moral condemnation. We must also be careful about our understanding of the expressions 'bad character' and 'good character'. For Aristotle, a bad character is one which detracts from *eudaimonia*, not because he has no conception of or no interest in wrong-doing,

but because wrong-doing is not what he is at this stage concerned to discuss.

So Aristotle can arrive at his final definition of excellences of character. 'It is a settled state of choice, in a mean relative to us, which mean is determined by reason as the wise man determines it' (1106b 36–1107a 2). The notion of choice and the part played by reason will, of course, require further elucidation, by Aristotle and in this book. By saying that the mean is relative to us Aristotle is making it clear that he is not using any mathematical notion, such as those of an arithmetical or geometrical mean, but that the mean is determined by, is relative to, all the circumstances in which the choice of actions has to be made.

The statement that excellence of character is in a mean and that this serves to differentiate it from other human dispositions and settled states perhaps requires some justification. To say that excellence of character is in a mean is to say that the emotions that are its domain can be experienced and displayed in action both too much and too little. Let us, anticipating a little our discussion of theoretical excellence, contrast excellence of character with one excellence of theoretical intelligence which Aristotle tells us is concerned with grasping basic truths. But there is no possibility of grasping basic truths too much, too frequently, etcetera; there is only one fault corresponding to the excellence – intellectual dullness, inability to grasp these truths.

In this way, and because, also, excellence of character is the only human disposition concerned with choice at all, the thesis that it is differentiated by choice in a mean, can serve to differentiate excellence of character from other human excellences. Aristotle, of course, realizes, and indeed claims, that intermediates can often be best in other areas. Thus, in relation to health, one can take too much or too little exercise and eat too much or too little food. Here, too, the mean is relative to us, since different people with different occupations will need different quantities and types of food and exercise. Aristotle does not need to claim that only the thing defined exhibits the specific difference; he needs to claim only that it is the one thing within the genus that exhibits the feature. Similarly, God is rational, but Aristotle can define man as a rational animal since God is not

an animal. His claim is that exhibiting mean choice applies only to those settled human dispositions that are excellences of character, and that it characterizes all of these.

We have seen that the whole of this account of excellence of character, including the doctrine of the mean, is theoretical, not practical, since it has been devoted to the discovery of a definition. Its theoretical character becomes more obvious by contrast with the very end of Book II, where Aristotle does offer some directly practical advice. There he notes that it is not easy to be sure what action will on each occasion exhibit a mean disposition, so that when in doubt one should veer towards the extreme which is less pernicious than the other and also away from the one that one is more inclined to lean towards. If, for example, one were inclined to be too meek, one should, when in doubt, aim towards the side of self-assertiveness, while, if being too angry were worse than not being as angry as the occasion warrants, one should, for that reason also, tend towards mildness. Aristotle also notes that one cannot in practical matters ever determine exactly where the mean lies and how far one has to depart from it before one is deserving of blame, nor can one lay down precise rules for determining the mean. 'The decision rests with perception' says Aristotle (1109b 23), by which laconic remark he does not mean that one sees, intuitively, in some ineffable way how to behave, but that you need to be present in the particular situation to judge, and no general principle can be comprehensive enough to take account of the values of all the variables to be taken account of. In the same way, he notes, only the man on the spot can decide whether the bread is properly cooked (1113a 1).

This whole approach to the problems of action is in striking contrast to such modern ethical doctrines as regard certain kinds of action as invariably right in themselves and others as invariably wrong; Kant claimed, for example, that lying, promise breaking and suicide were of their own nature wrong. Others would claim that some emotions are in themselves evil and a mark of the depravity of human nature. But Aristotle is aware of the possibility of such views, and explains that the difference between them and his is more apparent than real. Thus, he agrees

that the emotional state called shamelessness is in itself always and inevitably bad (1107a 11): but this is because shamelessness is the name given to an emotion only when in excess, the same emotion being called modesty when in a mean. 'Some things are named with their worthlessness included' (1107a 10), but these are already extremes. Such principles as 'Never display excess or deficiency of an emotion' are, no doubt, true, but are empty. In the same way, some actions are always wrong, such as adultery and murder, which are named with their worthlessness included. But adultery will usually be a manifestation of excessive sexual desire, excessive in this case because towards the wrong person; homicide, similarly, is only called murder when unjustified. Murder will frequently exhibit an excess of anger or greed. Aristotle is clearly to some degree successful in dealing with these apparent exceptions to his view. But there do remain disagreements with such views as those of Kant, for it is not clear how Aristotle could claim that lying and suicide, for example, could be defined in an evaluative way which made their condemnation universal but empty.

Finally, here is a summary of the main points of Aristotle's account of excellence of character:

- 1 All action directly or indirectly exhibits some emotion.
- 2 For each specific excellence of character there will be some specific emotion whose field it is.
- 3 In the case of each such emotion it is possible to be disposed to exhibit it to the right degree; this is excellence of character.
- 4 In the case of each such emotion it is possible to be disposed to exhibit it too much or too little, and each of these dispositions is a defect of character.
- 5 'Too much' includes 'on too many occasions' and similar possibilities as well as 'too violently'; 'too little' includes 'on too few occasions' and similar possibilities as well as 'too weakly'.
- 6 The right amount has to be determined by reason.
- 7 So excellence can be defined as being a settled disposition of choice in a mean relative to us, such as the wise man would determine it.
- 8 There is no emotion that no one should ever exhibit.