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CHAPTER 1

ARISTOTLE AND THE QUESTION OF VIRTUE: WHY BOTHER BEING GOOD?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

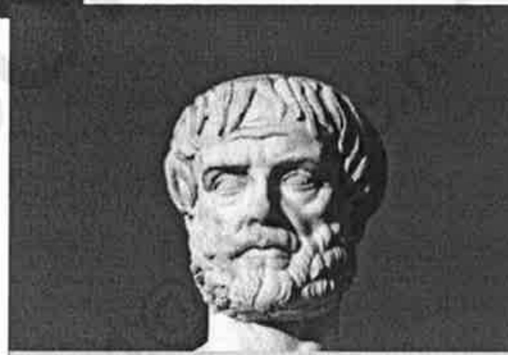
After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

1.1 Analyze virtue and define its role in making moral decisions.

1.2 Examine virtue ethics after Aristotle and apply it to today's issues.

1.3 Discuss Elizabeth Anscombe's philosophy and the concepts of "right" and "wrong."

1.4 Critically analyze Ayn Rand's praise of selfishness and compare it to Aristotle's ethics.



Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.), Greek philosopher, author of the earliest treatise on moral philosophy, *The Nicomachean Ethics.*
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1.1 VIRTUE AND ETHICS

What kind of person do I want to be? That is a good question, a question that is central to Aristotle's ethics as well as his politics. In the introduction to this textbook we saw that there are three elements in any moral problem, three different things to consider when making a judgment: the act itself; the consequences of that act; and the **moral agent,** that is, the person performing the act in question. For the most part, the subject matter of moral philosophy

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involves sets of rules and rational ways to justify those rules: These ways to make judgments concern the first two elements of moral questions. Kant's **categorical imperative** and Mill's **utilitarian** or **consequentialist** moral philosophies, which follow this chapter, outline the rationale behind those arguments and suggest ways to use our reason to make moral judgments based on the act itself or on the consequences of the act in question. They are eminently reasonable ways of judging something right or wrong. However, looking at the moral agent is a much older and still perhaps the most useful way to make a moral decision. The subject of **moral philosophy**, or **ethics** goes back thousands of years. **Socrates**, in Plato's *Republic*, tells us that ethics is about "no small matter, but how we ought to live." **Plato** alluded to the subject often, and his notion that the right sort of moral behavior involves not only actions but feelings was to have an influence on Plato's most brilliant pupil, Aristotle. But even in his *Republic*, Plato does not treat ethics as a separate field of study.

Three generations after Socrates, around 325 B.C.E., Aristotle wrote his *Nicomachean Ethics*, the first full, comprehensive treatment of the subject in the history of humanity. Aristotle put moral philosophy not in terms of the right thing to do but rather the right way to be. For Aristotle, ethics is a question of character.

The most desirable character is that of a virtuous person because, according to Aristotle, a life lived according to reason shows us that in the long run that person is simply likelier to be happier than a person who lacks virtue. Reason, Aristotle noted, makes human beings better than animals, better than plants. We use our reason to cultivate virtue, nourishing our intellectual virtues through life experience and developing moral virtues through habit. Aristotle's ethics of virtue begins by asking a most basic question, namely, what makes a good person? What traits are necessary to be good? The moral agent, the person actually performing whatever act we may want to judge, becomes the central concern of moral judgments. "What kind of person would do this?" "Would a virtuous person do this?" "Would the kind of person I want to be do this?" These questions suggest ways to pass judgment not on an action or its consequences, but rather on the kind of character that is desirable, the kind of life we should consider good.

> ***"One swallow does not a summer make, neither does one beautiful day; similarly, one day, one brief moment of happiness does not make a person entirely happy."***
>
> Aristotle

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WHAT IS VIRTUE?

So what is **virtue**? Aristotle defines virtue as a midpoint between two extremes or vices, those of excess and deficiency. For example, a generous person is neither cheap nor extravagant. A courageous soldier is neither reckless nor cowardly. A good student does not simply ignore the assigned readings in philosophy class but also has a life: Studying day and night might make you bored and boring, not to mention tired. Consider this from Aristotle's perspective: Faced with a box of delicious, fresh, and gleaming doughnuts, what do you do? Skip them altogether, or eat the box? Aristotle's ethics suggest that either of those actions, both extreme, would be wrong, unless you happen to be diabetic and require sugar immediately. In other words, have a doughnut, maybe two; if you don't like them, stop. Ignore them and you may never know what you are missing; have a dozen at a time and, over time, your arteries might clog and your health will suffer. Most diets that work—unlike fad weight-loss programs like the Atkins diet and the South Beach diet in which you restrict your food intake dramatically—work on the basic Aristotelian definition of virtue as somewhere in the middle between two extremes. They suggest that you eat in moderation whatever you want to. In other words, don't starve yourself, but don't overeat either.

IS IT EVER RIGHT TO BETRAY A FRIEND?

You should of course be loyal to your friends, and do the things that loyal friends do: support each other, keep each other's confidences, and be trustworthy. But if a friend tells you he has found a cheap and effective way to build a bomb that he plans to set off in your professor's office, this might be a good time to think that too much loyalty can be a bad thing. What do you think in this case? In terms of Aristotle's virtues, can you be too loyal, in the same way as you could be disloyal? In this case, you might want to tell somebody what your friend is planning to do even if, in ordinary circumstances, that would be betraying a friend. Think of other examples where a particular virtue may be tested to an extreme.

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HOW DOES ONE BECOME VIRTUOUS?

Virtues are cultivated by habit while exercising our reason. No one is born friendly, industrious, dependable, tactful, thoughtful, or tolerant. No children are born bigoted—they learn that at home. No one is born a great dancer or musician: It takes learning the right way and doing it that way often, persistence, and dedicated work to begin the road to excellence in the virtues of dancing beautifully or making great music. Just as it is only by practicing and competing one becomes a great Olympic athlete, as Aristotle mentions in one of his examples, it is only by doing the things a virtuous person does that one becomes virtuous. And it is *doing*, not saying or meaning to do, that counts.

We learn the habit of virtue by performing the acts necessary to that virtue. Our actions in fact emerge from our habits. If you say, for example, if only I had more time, I'd be a better parent—then you are not a better parent. In other words, do what good parents do: Make time for your children, be with them, support them, and let them know you are there for them even when you are not at home with them. People who claim that if only they had the time they could write a great book are in fact not great writers. To achieve the goal of becoming a great writer, start writing and then keep at it. You become a good friend by doing what good friends do, just as you become a good pianist or a good dancer by playing the piano or by dancing. If we are to be virtuous, if we are to be good, we do these things habitually—because that is who we are. That is how we have chosen to be. Wisdom, incidentally, grows out of those choices. There is no way around that, and Aristotle puts it on us to choose to live one way or another. Loyalty, fairness, honesty, consideration, courteousness and patience, tactfulness and compassion, discretion, and even love—all are qualities we learn only by doing and by doing them well.

According to Aristotle, they are also qualities that are likely to lead to a happy life.

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MORAL PHILOSOPHERS: ARISTOTLE

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Aristotle was born in Stagira, in the Macedonian coast, north of Athens. At age 17, he was sent to Athens to study with Plato at his academy, where he flourished intellectually for 20 years and eventually grew to disagree with his mentor on the nature of reality and the possibility of knowledge. Aristotle's approach to seeking knowledge is what we today call the scientific method and involves asking four basic questions: "What is it?" "What is it made of?" "What made it?" and, most important, "What is its purpose?" He believed that using our reason we could find answers to these important questions. And the last question, when asked about human beings, is the foundation of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Although all of us want different things in life, we all want these things because they will make us happy. So, reason reveals to us, to be happy is the final function of human beings.

In 343 B.C.E, Aristotle returned to Macedonia to be the tutor of the son of King Philip and other young men at his court. One of those teenage pupils was Alexander, soon be to known as Alexander the Great, the conqueror of much of the known world. When Athens came under Macedonian rule, the well-connected Aristotle returned to Athens and founded the Lyceum (though some sources mention that the school was already there and Aristotle simply became the new director). Perhaps because of his fondness for the breezy outdoor classes he had taught in Macedonia's palace gardens, Aristotle preferred to teach his class while wandering around the colonnades outside. He and his followers became known as the Peripatetic School, from the Greek word *peripatetikos*, or "walking around." After the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C.E and the beginning of the Age of Successors with the attending political decline of Greece—not coincidentally, the beginning of the rise of Rome—Athens turned against Macedonia and Aristotle was charged with impiety and corrupting youth. These were the same charges brought against Socrates three generations earlier. Mindful of that trial's tragic outcome, Aristotle decided to leave town, famously saying that he "did not want Athens to sin against philosophy twice."

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THE ROLE OF HAPPINESS IN VIRTUE

"The good of man," Aristotle writes in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, "is an activity of the soul in conformity with virtue." Reason, which all humans have, shows us that happiness is our end in life. Happiness seems to be the only thing for which we have no reason other than itself. Ever the clever critical thinker, Aristotle points out that "since there is evidently more than one end, and we choose some of these for the sake of something else, clearly not all ends are final ends; but the principal good is something final."

"Now such a thing happiness, above all else, we find to be," he continues, "for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else." Happiness is then the highest good: You might want money or a great job, or an "A" in philosophy class, or a big house, or a nap. Why do you want those things? Because they will make you happy. Why do you want to be happy? We just do, we all do. All the goods we want, we want because they will make us happy. Happiness is a universal goal. Happiness is its own reason, and reason itself reveals to us that no one wants to be unhappy on purpose. There is a staggering variety when it comes to what people want, and a lovely and astute recognition of human diversity is at the heart of Aristotle's ethics: We all want different things, but each of us wants whatever we choose to want because that will make us happy.

> ***"People are bad in countless ways, but good in only one."***
>
> Aristotle

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FOCUS ON: Ayn Rand and the Virtue of Selfishness

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Ayn Rand was a minor but influential Russian-émigré novelist and philosopher of capitalism, who promoted what she called the virtue of selfishness or objectivism. In her books *Anthem, The Fountainhead*, and *Atlas Shrugged*, she illustrated her theory that self-interest ought to be the guiding principle of morals. According to her philosophy, which can be termed **ethical egoism**, the world is divided into two categories: me and the rest of you. I'll take care of my business, and if I'm strong enough, I'll succeed by my own efforts. If you can't or won't, tough luck. "The achievement of his own happiness is man's highest moral purpose," she announced in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, a 1961 book that contains the most concise summary of her objectivist philosophy, one that rejects altruism of any kind. This is a fundamental rejection of Aristotle's ethics of virtue. Generosity and compassion, which Aristotle might consider desirable virtues, are downright insulting to the individual, according to Rand. Selfishness itself, which Aristotle would consider a vice—an extreme that pulls one away from virtue, is not only fine but desirable in Rand's philosophy.

This philosophy entered the spotlight recently when U.S. Congressman Paul Ryan, an early candidate in the 2008 presidential election, gave his congressional staff copies of *Atlas Shrugged* as required reading. "I think Ayn Rand did the best job of anybody to build a moral case of capitalism, and that morality of capitalism is under assault," Ryan said in 2009. The public policy suggested by Rand's philosophy—and embraced by Ryan—is clear: The disabled, those on food stamps, the veterans who need medical care, the uneducated masses who cannot afford college, and the "parasites, moochers, looters, brutes and thugs," as Ayn Rand puts it, should not be anyone's problem but theirs. Hungry children? You help them if you want to; no one is stopping you, but there is no obligation for me to help. Altruism is insulting and self-destructive, sacrificing the talented and the strong for the sake of the weak. According to Rand, your life is yours to live, and you come first. Caring for others only hurts your self-interest or at least should not be pursued unless it happens to be in your own self-interest.

Following this line of thought, ethical egoism illustrates a radical respect for the individual. Great Britain's Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher—who, along with the U.S. President Ronald Reagan, came close to espousing Rand's philosophy—famously said that "There is no society," emphasizing the value of the individual over that of the group in a most Randian way.

Is there something wrong with these views? There are, after all, more of them than of us; there is only so far a society can go oppressing and exploiting the majority of its population before these people in fact revolt. Seventeenth-century philosopher **Thomas Hobbes**, no altruist, suggested that egoism actually leads to a more familiar result: We do unto others as we would have them do unto us, because we really do not want to have them do us wrong. We will cover the arbitrariness of selfishness—the very basic question "What makes you so special?"—in subsequent chapters and discuss why it flies in the face of reason when exploring the moral philosophies of **Immanuel Kant** and **John Stuart Mill**. Still, it is a serious challenge to moral philosophy to have to face someone, particularly someone already privileged and in power, who really and truly does not care about you or what happens to you.

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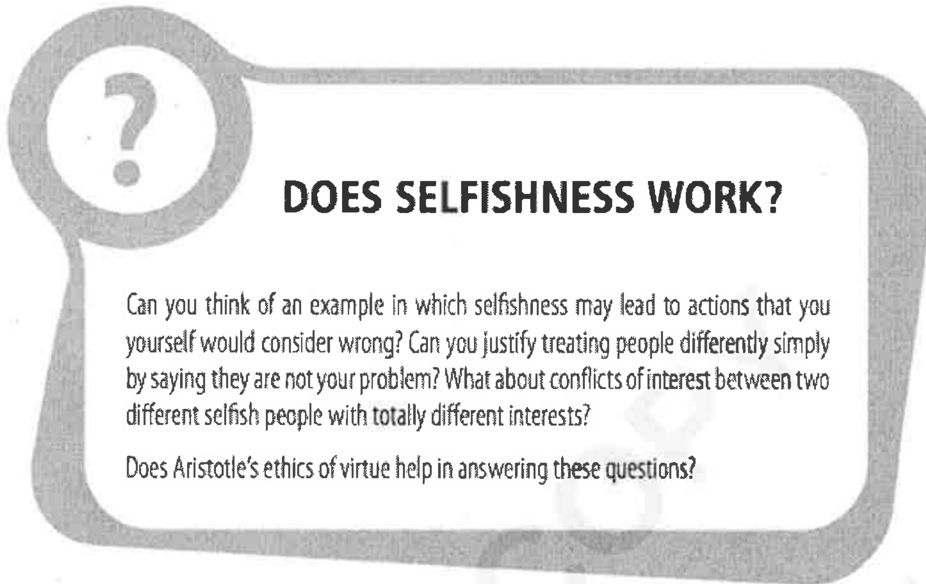

DOES SELFISHNESS WORK?

Can you think of an example in which selfishness may lead to actions that you yourself would consider wrong? Can you justify treating people differently simply by saying they are not your problem? What about conflicts of interest between two different selfish people with totally different interests?

Does Aristotle's ethics of virtue help in answering these questions?

1.2 VIRTUE ETHICS AFTER ARISTOTLE

Virtue ethics, as Aristotle's ethics has become known in modern times, is a powerful force in current moral debates. Particularly in an increasingly secular world, the ethics of virtue provides common ground for dialogue among believers and nonbelievers alike. It is, of course, important to keep in mind that the way in which Aristotle's philosophy has been put to use in the millennia after Aristotle is not always consistent with the great Greek philosopher's original intent. However, it is also important to note that Jews, Christians, and Muslims—the three great monotheistic Abrahamic religions—have been greatly influenced by Aristotle in matters of theology as well as in ethics. Jewish tradition, like Homer's polytheistic Hellenistic tradition that nourished Aristotle, goes back to the Iron Age but found Aristotle useful in the Middle Ages. Maimonides, the great 12th-century Jewish theologian and moral philosopher from Cordoba, in what is now Spain, incorporated Aristotle's theory of the four causes into Judaism. Christianity, which flourished after the 1st century B.C.E., and the Muslim tradition, beginning in the 7th century—both underwent a strengthening of each of its theologies in the Middle Ages, and Aristotle's ethics was an influence on the ethics of all three monotheistic religions. That is, regardless of one's views on reality and on God, it makes sense to use

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Aristotle's scientific method of the four causes to ask the ultimate question of purpose, including the purpose of life. It is by using, and misusing, that method **St. Thomas Aquinas** Christianized Aristotle and came up with his own theory of natural law in the Middle Ages, a moral philosophy we will analyze in the following chapters. **Al-Farabi**, who is credited with preserving and commenting on Greek philosophy during Europe's Dark Ages in the 9th century, **Avicenna (Ibn Sina)**—a great thinker and writer in the Islamic Golden Age and the staunch defender of Aristotelian philosophy—and **Averroes (Ibn Rushd)** found Aristotle useful in developing and explaining the burgeoning Muslim theology. Following Aristotle, we may disagree on metaphysical matters, but we generally agree that human beings have reason and can use that reason to find the truth.

The questions Aristotle asked three millennia ago, known as his theory of the four causes, remain both sensible and useful. To know anything, according to Aristotle, we should use our reason and ask "What is it?" "How was it made?" What is it made of?" and, most important, "What is it for?" This quest for a final cause of things suggests that by exercising our reason we can find the truth, including a moral truth. The answer to the question "What are human beings for?" turns out to be "To be happy." That is our final cause according to Aristotle, given that it is one the one thing we want for its own sake and not for any other reason. Thus, regardless of the source of one's beliefs, it seems eminently sensible to ask both what makes people happy and what traits of character make a good person. In other words, it makes more sense to ask "What kind of person would do this?" or "Would a good person do such a thing?" rather than "Is this right?" or "Is this wrong?"

QUICK LOOK: MAKING AN ARISTOTELIAN ARGUMENT

- Would a virtuous person do this?
- What kind of person would do this?
- Would the kind of person I want to be do this?

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OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

In making any moral judgment, it still of course makes sense to consider the act itself, as well as the consequences of the act in question. These two very influential, much later moral philosophies are examined in the following two chapters. Considering the act as the main element of a moral decision is an approach suggested first by the 18th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant. Some things are wrong no matter what kind of person you are, Kant argues, and some things are right and it is your duty to do them, again no matter who you are. Considering the consequences of an act is the main focus of a group of philosophers beginning in the 19th century with **Jeremy Bentham** and John Stuart Mill and more recently of **James Rachels** and **Peter Singer.** These philosophers belong to a school called utilitarians, or consequentialists. Utilitarian arguments, in which nothing but the consequences of an act matter when making a moral judgment, have been the force behind virtually every civil rights cause in the 20th and 21st centuries. For example, there was a recent debate centering on allowing women to serve in combat in the U.S. Army. Many felt it was right because the consequences of doing so did not significantly affect the men who were already serving—that is, it was not the case that men could no longer serve in combat if women were allowed to serve. Rather it was the case that women also could serve if they chose to do so. Even if some were unhappy about being in combat alongside women, utilitarians after Mill argued that not every happiness or unhappiness is the same and that the unhappiness of the male soldiers resulting from having to fight alongside women was not as big a consideration as the unhappiness of women being denied that opportunity in the first place. That job opportunity for men was in no way affected. Utilitarian, as well as Kantian, moral theories are major forces in ethics today. Even so, the pull of Aristotle's ethics of virtue remains strong. Judges and heads of parole boards, for example, may not consider the act or its consequences as much as the Aristotelian question "Is this a good person?" More than a few politicians have been known to ask, when fighting for social legislation, "What kind of country do we want to be?" or simply to say "This is not who we are." At least one prominent theologian who opposes the death penalty has famously asked "Would Jesus pull the switch?" Those are all Aristotelian approaches to moral and political problems.

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THE HABIT OF VIRTUE

You find yourself in Starbucks late one night, and you are the only customer. Before you hand over your money, as the barista turns around to make your caffè latte grandè with perhaps a few more Italian qualifiers added for good measure, you notice this big paper cup filled with quarters and bills with a sign saying "TIPS."

Do you steal the tips? Do you think whether that would be right or wrong?

If you think it's right, you might find some justification in Ayn Rand's objectivist philosophy: If it will benefit you and you can get away with it, go ahead. Your own self-interest is your best guide.

If, on the other hand, you think it would be wrong to steal the tips, can you come up with a reason why this would be wrong? Your reasons for an argument might include everything from "You didn't work for that money," "You wouldn't want somebody to do that to you," "It is just not fair, that guy worked for those tips," "It's not your money," and also "They have security cameras, you'll get caught and have a police record because of a few dollars," or even "It's a sin to steal." You will learn more about the relation of these reasons to several moral theories—most of them quite good—later in the text.

But what if it never had even occurred to you to steal the tips until this question was asked here?

In that case, you are not the kind of person who does that. You don't have to make a choice at all, because stealing tips is simply not what you do. It did not cross your mind to steal. In this case, you have developed the habit of virtue. If you are not the kind of student who, say, will spend the semester figuring out how to hack your professor's computer to get a look at an upcoming exam, then you are virtuous in that sense. You are not that kind of student.

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THE HABIT OF VIRTUE
continued

Great pianists like Daniel Barenboim don't stop to think where their fingers will go next or where to cross over their hands; they play well by habit, after a lot of practice. Great ballerinas like Natalia Osipova or Misty Copeland don't think and choose how to prepare a perfect *demi-plié* to create an impression of defying gravity and standing still in space as they jump in Act 2 of *Giselle*. They just do the jump right, by habit. Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, arguably the world's greatest soccer players, simply do not think carefully about what seems like superhuman speed, dribbling, passing, and striking. They just do it.

The American ballerina Misty Copeland
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That is how virtue is achieved according to Aristotle. You do things and do them well because that is likelier to make you happy in the long run. And if you do it right long enough, you won't even think about it. That is the kind of person you are. That is a virtuous person.

FC Barcelona's Lionel Messi
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BUILDING THE HABIT OF VIRTUE

In his influential 1981 book *After Virtue*, the moral and political philosopher **Alasdair MacIntyre** suggests that "there seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture" if we keep looking to argue about whether a specific action is right or wrong, whether its consequences are good or bad. Life cannot be simply a matter of rules. MacIntyre proposes a distinction between internal and external goods in describing practices basic to building the habit of virtue, such as rewarding a child with ice cream after finishing a grueling piano practice. In MacIntyre's view, the reason for the child's persistence might be the ice cream. But the result might also be the habit of playing well. In other words, no matter how external the actions are performed often and well, the habit of virtue will be an internal reward, something the young pianist will have. Good habits are learned as easily as bad ones, so learning good ones is better because they are likely to lead to a happy life. If that is the case, a return to Aristotle is in order. In other words, should we concern ourselves with being good people rather than with judging acts right or wrong?

1.3 ELIZABETH ANSCOMBE: GETTING AWAY FROM "RIGHT" AND "WRONG"

Elizabeth Anscombe, a British philosopher known for her neo-Kantian views but also for having gravitated toward Aristotle in ethics, perhaps put it best in her 1958 *Modern Moral Philosophy* when she claimed that "The concepts of obligation—*moral* obligation and *moral* duty, that is to say—and of what is morally right and morally wrong, ought to be jettisoned. It would be a great improvement if, instead of 'morally wrong,' one always named a genus such as 'untruthful,' 'unchaste,' 'unjust'. " In other words, Anscombe suggests, we should look to the moral agent of the action in question and we should cultivate our judgments of people's characters both individually and in society. The Aristotelian ethical question "Would the kind of person I want to be do this?" easily leads to the political question "Would the kind of society we want to be do this?" When President Barack Obama in 2014, after the release of a Senate report on CIA torture, said that "this is not who we are," and Senator Angus King added that "This is not America, this is not who we are," they were using Aristotelian arguments.

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Aristotle and his followers today believe that these questions are ones everyone needs to ask, in both the private and public spheres: The ethics of virtue easily applies to politics, and the traits of character that add up to making a good person—such as compassion, trustworthiness, or kindness—are also those that make a good society. And, even as other more recent moral theories have proved to be both useful and sensible, Aristotle's ethics of virtue remains not only the oldest but perhaps the most powerful of moral theories. It remains true that, despite all our differences, we all want to be happy, and we all can approach happiness by leading virtuous lives.

In this selection from his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (384 B.C.E–322 B.C.E) articulates how happiness is the goal of life, because reason shows us it is the one thing we choose for its own sake. To approach that goal, a life of virtue is better than a life of its opposite. The philosopher then defines virtue as a mean between two vices, those of deficiency and excess.

READING: ARISTOTLE: THE VIRTUES

To say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account of what it is still desired. This might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function of man. For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or an artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function. Have the carpenter, then, and the tanner certain functions or activities, and has man none? Is he born without a function? Or as eye, hand, foot, and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these? What then can this be? Life seems to be common even to plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but it also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle; of this, one part has such a principle in the sense of being obedient to one, the other in the sense of possessing one and exercising thought. And, as 'life of the rational element' also has two meanings, we must state that life in the sense of activity is what we mean; for this seems to be the more proper sense of the term. Now if the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle,

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From *The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*, 14/e, translated by F.H. Peters, 1902.

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and if we say 'so-and-so' and 'a good so-and-so' have a function which is the same in kind, e.g. a lyre, and a good lyre-player, and so without qualification in all cases, eminence in respect of goodness being added to the name of the function (for the function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre, and that of a good lyre-player is to do so well): if this is the case, and we state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete.

But we must add "over a lifetime," for one swallow does not a summer make, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short moment of pleasure and joy, does not make anyone blessed and truly happy.

If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be that of the best thing in us. Whether it be reason or something else that is this element which is thought to be our natural ruler and guide and to take thought of things noble and divine, whether it be itself also divine or only the most divine element in us, the activity of this in accordance with its proper virtue will be perfect happiness. That this activity is contemplative we have already said.

Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for self and never for the sake of something else, but honour, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that by means of them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these.

> ***If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be that of the best thing in us.***

Virtue too is distinguished into kinds in accordance with this difference; for we say that some of the virtues are intellectual and others moral, philosophic wisdom and understanding and practical wisdom being

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intellectual, liberality and temperance moral. For in speaking about a man's character we do not say that he is wise or has understanding but that he is good-tempered or temperate; yet we praise the wise man also with respect to his state of mind; and of states of mind we call those which merit praise virtues.

Virtue, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name (ethike) is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word ethos (habit). From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature. For instance the stone which by nature moves downwards cannot be habituated to move upwards, not even if one tries to train it by throwing it up ten thousand times; nor can fire be habituated to move downwards, nor can anything else that by nature behaves in one way be trained to behave in another. Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.

Again, of all the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity (this is plain in the case of the senses; for it was not by often seeing or often hearing that we got these senses, but on the contrary we had them before we used them, and did not come to have them by using them); but the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.

This is confirmed by what happens in states; for legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them, and this is the wish of every legislator, and those who do not effect it miss their mark, and it is in this that a good constitution differs from a bad one.

Again, it is from the same causes and by the same means that every virtue is both produced and destroyed, and similarly every art; for it is from playing the lyre that both good and bad lyre-players are produced. And the corresponding statement is true of builders and of all the rest; men will be good or bad builders as a result of building well or badly. For if this were not so, there would have been no need of a teacher, but all men would have been born good or bad at their craft. This, then, is the case with the virtues

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also; by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly. The same is true of appetites and feelings of anger; some men become temperate and good-tempered, others self-indulgent and irascible, by behaving in one way or the other in the appropriate circumstances. Thus, in one word, states of character arise out of like activities. This is why the activities we exhibit must be of a certain kind; it is because the states of character correspond to the differences between these. It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference.

If it is thus, then, that every art does its work well- by looking to the intermediate and judging its works by this standard (so that we often say of good works of art that it is not possible either to take away or to add anything, implying that excess and defect destroy the goodness of works of art, while the mean preserves it; and good artists, as we say, look to this in their work), and if, further, virtue is more exact and better than any art, as nature also is, then virtue must have the quality of aiming at the intermediate. I mean moral virtue; for it is this that is concerned with passions and actions, and in these there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. For instance, both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, 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 virtue. Similarly with regard to actions also there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. Now virtue is concerned with passions and actions, in which excess is a form of failure, and so is defect, while the intermediate is praised and is a form of success; and being praised and being successful are both characteristics of virtue. Therefore virtue is a kind of mean, since, as we have seen, it aims at what is intermediate.

> ***Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect.***

Again, it is possible to fail in many ways (for evil belongs to the class of the unlimited, as the Pythagoreans conjectured, and good to that of the limited), while to succeed is possible only in one way (for which reason

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also one is easy and the other difficult—to miss the mark easy, to hit it difficult); for these reasons also, then, excess and defect are characteristic of vice, and the mean of virtue;

For people are good in but one way, but bad in many.

Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, that is, the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate. Hence in respect of its substance and the definition which states its essence virtue is a mean, with regard to what is best and right an extreme.

But not every action nor every passion admits of a mean; for some have names that already imply badness, e.g. spite, shamelessness, envy, and in the case of actions adultery, theft, murder; for all of these and suchlike things imply by their names that they are themselves bad, and not the excesses or deficiencies of them. It is not possible, then, ever to be right with regard to them; one must always be wrong. Nor does goodness or badness with regard to such things depend on committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way, but simply to do any of them is to go wrong. It would be equally absurd, then, to expect that in unjust, cowardly, and voluptuous action there should be a mean, an excess, and a deficiency; for at that rate there would be a mean of excess and of deficiency, an excess of excess, and a deficiency of deficiency. But as there is no excess and deficiency of temperance and courage because what is intermediate is in a sense an extreme, so too of the actions we have mentioned there is no mean nor any excess and deficiency, but however they are done they are wrong; for in general there is neither a mean of excess and deficiency, nor excess and deficiency of a mean.

And what we said before will apply now; that which is proper to each thing is by nature best and most pleasant for each thing; for man, therefore, the life according to reason is best and pleasantest, since reason more than anything else is man. This life therefore is also the happiest.

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Speaking of virtue—which strategy works for you?

You are minding your own business driving to school on a major highway, and another driver cuts you off while changing lanes without even signaling. How do you respond?

- You curse loudly.
- You use one or more of the international hand gestures at the driver.
- You speed up, cut off in front of the offending car, and then slow down.
- You pull out a gun.
- You do nothing, shrug, turn up your music, and keep driving.

Which action will allow you to arrive at school in a better mood, ready for work, and study? Depending on whether you react in any of the first four ways or opt for the last response as a matter of habit, which response is likelier to make you happy?

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CHAPTER PHILOSOPHERS

Al-Farabi (ca. 870–950), leading philosopher and theologian of the Islamic Golden Age, a time when Europe, except for what is now Spain, was going through the historical period known as the Dark Ages. An Aristotelian, he was popularly known as the "Second Master," that is, after the Greek philosopher.

Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe (1919–2001), a native of Limerick, Ireland, and a major force in ethics, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of language.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), Sicilian theologian and philosopher, active in Paris, who attempted to adapt the teachings of the pagan Aristotle to those of the Christian faith in the Middle Ages.

Averroes (Ibn Rushd) (1126–1198), a native of Cordoba, Spain, perhaps the most influential Muslim philosopher as well as a forefather of the European Renaissance.

Avicenna (Ibn Sina) (980–1037), a great thinker and writer in the Islamic Golden Age—and the staunch defender of Aristotelian philosophy.

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), British philosopher considered the father of utilitarianism; active in law and politics as well as ethics, he was an early proponent of women's rights, abolition of slavery and the death penalty, and decriminalization of homosexuality.

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), British philosopher, one of the first proponents of materialism in the modern era.

James Rachels (1941–2003), American moral philosopher, particularly celebrated for his utilitarian views on animal rights and on the "Death with Dignity" movement.

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Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), German philosopher, proponent of the most influential moral philosopher since Aristotle; see also "Categorical imperative."

Alasdair MacIntyre (b. 1929), Scottish philosopher, known for his work on ethics and theology.

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), British philosopher who perfected classical utilitarianism, an ethical theory that states it is the consequences of an act that matter most in making a moral decision.

Peter Singer (b. 1946), a native of Melbourne, Australia, one of the most influential and controversial contemporary utilitarians; he is the author of several books on moral philosophy including *Animal Liberation*, *Practical Ethics*, and *Rethinking Life and Death.*

Plato (ca. 427–347 B.C.E.), Socrates' pupil and Aristotle's teacher, one of the most influential philosophers in history.

Ayn Rand (1905–1982), minor but influential Russian-émigré novelist and philosopher who promoted what she called the virtue of selfishness or objectivism.

Socrates (ca. 470–399 B.C.E.), major Ancient Greek philosopher who considered that "the unexamined life is not worth living." He was Plato's teacher and the inspiration for his dialogues.

KEY TERMS

Categorical imperative A central concept in Immanuel Kant's philosophy, a product of reason that should be used as a guide in making a moral decision.

Consequentialist Ethical theory that considers the consequences of an act the primary factor in making a judgment; see also "Utilitarian."

Ethical egoism A moral theory based on selfishness, suggesting that a person's own interests should take precedence over anyone else's.

Ethics The branch of philosophy concerning questions of the right thing to do and the right way to live; see also "Moral philosophy."

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Moral agent The person performing the act in question, one of the elements of any moral problem besides the act itself and the consequences of the act.

Moral philosophy The branch of philosophy concerning questions of the right thing to do and the right way to live; see also "Ethics."

Utilitarian Ethical theory that considers the consequences of an act the primary factor in making a judgment; see also "Consequentialist."

Virtue Aristotle defines virtue as a midpoint between two extremes or vices, those of excess and deficiency.

Virtue ethics A contemporary term for Aristotle's moral philosophy, that is, for considering the moral agent's character the main element of a moral problem, as opposed to the act itself or its consequences.

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