

A. Classical Ethical Theories

READING 32

Nicomachean Ethics

Aristotle

Aristotle was born in the town of Stagira in northern Greece in 384 B.C.E. At the age of 17, he went to Athens to study at Plato's Academy, where he remained until Plato's death 20 years later. He then spent three years in the city of Assos in Asia Minor and two years in Mytilene on the island of Lesbos. In 343 or 342 he accepted the invitation of King Philip II of Macedon to become the tutor of his 13-year-old son, Alexander (later known as Alexander the Great). After a few years at the royal court in Pella, Aristotle returned to Stagira. In 335 he went back to Athens, where he founded a school called the Lyceum. When Alexander died in 323, strong anti-Macedonian sentiment arose in Athens. Because of his connections with Macedon, Aristotle thought it prudent to leave Athens. He went to Chalcis on the island of Euboea, where he died the following year of a stomach ailment.

Aristotle is the author of two very different kinds of philosophical writings: polished works intended for the general reading public, and notes from which he lectured, intended for circulation among his students and associates. The polished works have been entirely lost except for a few fragments; what have survived are the notes from his lectures on a wide variety of topics, including logic, biology, physics, psychology, metaphysics, and ethics.

Our selection is taken from the set of notes known as the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Here Aristotle argues that the ultimate goal everyone seeks is happiness and that being moral is a necessary part of a happy life. Happiness, Aristotle contends, consists in living rationally. Living rationally requires that two parts of a person's soul function well: the part that is rational in the proper sense (the intellectual part, which *has* reason) and the part containing appetites and desires (appetites and desires are not rational in themselves, but they are capable of *listening to and obeying* reason).

These two parts of the soul function well if they possess their respective excellences (virtues, good inner dispositions). *Intellectual excellences* are those that enable reason in the proper sense to carry out its function; *excellences of character* are those qualities that enable appetites and desires to fulfill their functions. Aristotle argues that a person who lives in accordance with intellectual excellences and excellences of character attains happiness and is moral.

Intellectual excellences include such qualities as good sense and wisdom; excellences of character include such traits as courage and moderation. Aristotle defines excellences of character as dispositions to seek the intermediate between the two extremes of excess and deficiency—the intermediate with regard to both affections (emotions) and actions. For example, the excellence of the affection of boldness is *courage*, which lies between rashness and cowardice; the excellence of the action of giving and receiving money is *open-handedness* (generosity), which is intermediate between wastefulness and avarice. Aristotle explains that the way to acquire an excellence of character is to perform the appropriate acts repeatedly. To become a courageous person, for example, one must do courageous things.

BOOK I

Chapter 1

Every sort of expert knowledge and every inquiry, and similarly every action and undertaking, seems to seek some good. Because of that, people are right to affirm that the good is "that which all things seek." But there appears to be a certain difference among ends:¹ Some are activities, while others are products of some kind, over and above the activities themselves. Where there are ends over and above the activities, in these cases the products are by their nature better than the activities.

Since there are many sorts of action, and of expertise and knowledge, their ends turn out to be many, too. Thus health is the end of medicine, a ship of ship-building, victory of generalship, wealth of household management. But in every case where such activities fall under some single capacity, just as bridle-making falls under horsemanship, along with all the others that produce the equipment for horsemanship, and horsemanship along with every action that has to do with expertise in warfare falls under generalship—so in the same way others fall under a separate one. And in all activities the ends of the controlling ones are more desirable than the ends under them, because it is for the sake of the former that the latter too are pursued. It makes no difference—as in the case of the sorts of knowledge mentioned—whether the ends of the actions are the activities themselves or some other thing over and above these.

Chapter 2

If then there is some end in our practical projects that we wish for because of itself, while wishing for the other things we wish for because of it, and we do not choose everything because of something else (for if *that* is the case, the sequence will go on to infinity, making our desire empty and vain), it is clear that this will be the good, that is, the chief good. So in relation to life, too, knowing it will have great weight. And, like archers with a target, would we not be more successful in hitting the point we need to hit if we had this knowledge?

If so, then one must try to grasp it at least in outline—that is, what it might be and to which sort of expertise or productive capacity it belongs. It would seem to belong to the most sovereign expertise, the most architectonic.² Political expertise appears to be like this, for it is this expertise that sets out which of the expertises there needs to be in cities, and what sorts of expertise each group of people should learn, and up to what point. And we see even the most prestigious of the productive capacities falling under it, for example generalship, household management, and rhetoric. Since it makes use of the practical expertises that remain, and furthermore legislates about what one must do and what things one must abstain from doing, the end of this expertise will contain those of the rest; so that this end will be the human good. For even if the good is the

same for a single person and for a city, the good of the city is a greater and more complete thing both to achieve and to preserve; for while to do so for one person on his own is satisfactory enough, to do it for a nation or for cities is finer and more godlike. So our inquiry seeks these things, being a political inquiry in a way.

Chapter 3

Our account would be adequate if we achieved a degree of precision appropriate to the underlying material, for precision must not be sought to the same degree in all accounts of things, any more than it is by craftsmen in the things they are producing. Fine things and just things, which are what political expertise inquires about, involve great variation and irregularity, so that they come to seem fine and just by convention alone, and not by nature. Something like this lack of regularity is found also in good things, because of the fact that they turn out to be a source of damage to many people: Some in fact have perished because of wealth, others because of courage. We must be content then, when talking about things of this sort and starting from them, to show what is true about them roughly and in outline, and when talking about things that are for the most part, and starting from these, to reach conclusions too of the same sort. It is in this same way, then, that one must also receive each sort of account, for it is a mark of an educated person to look for precision in each kind of inquiry just to the extent that the nature of the subject allows it. It looks like the same kind of mistake to accept a merely persuasive account from a mathematician and to demand demonstrations³ from an expert in oratory. . . .

Chapter 4

Let us then resume the argument: Since every sort of knowledge and every undertaking seeks after some good, let us say what it is that we say political expertise seeks, and what the topmost of all achievable goods is. Pretty well most people are agreed about what to call it: Both ordinary people and people of quality say "happiness," and suppose that living well and doing well are the same thing as being happy. But they are in dispute about what happiness actually is, and ordinary people do not give the same answer as intellectuals. The first group identifies it with one of the obvious things that anyone would recognize, like pleasure or wealth or honor, while some pick some other thing and others another (often, too, the same person picks a different thing—when he falls ill, it's health, and if he is poor, it's wealth). But out of consciousness of their own ignorance they are in awe of those who say something impressive and over their heads. Some people used to think that besides these many goods there is another one, existing by itself, which is cause for all of these too of their being good.⁴ Now it is presumably rather otiose to examine all these opinions, and enough to examine those that are most widely held, or seem to have some justification. . . .

Chapter 5

... To judge from their lives, most people (that is, the most vulgar) seem, not unreasonably, to suppose [happiness] to be pleasure; that is just why they favor the life of consumption. The kinds of lives that stand out here are especially three: the one just mentioned, the political life, and the life of reflection.

Now most of the utterly slavish sort of people obviously decide in favor of a life that belongs to grazing cattle—and not without reason, given that many of those in high places behave like Sardanapallus.⁵ People of quality, for their part, those who tend towards a life of action, go for honor, for pretty much this is the end of the political life. But it appears more superficial than what we are looking for, as it seems to be located in those doing the honoring rather than in the person receiving it, and our hunch is that the good is something that belongs to a person and is difficult to take away from him. Again, people seem to pursue honor in order to be convinced that they themselves are good; at any rate they seek to be honored by people of discernment, and among those who know them, and to be honored for excellence. So it is clear, at any rate according to them, that excellence is of greater value. In fact, perhaps one might suppose that this is even more the end of the political life than honor is. But excellence too appears somewhat incomplete, for it seems to be possible actually to be asleep while having one's excellence, or to spend one's life in inactivity, and furthermore to suffer, and to meet with the greatest misfortunes—and no one would call the person who lived this kind of life happy, unless to defend a debating position. . . . Third of the three lives in question, then, is the life of reflection, about which we shall make our investigation in what follows.⁶

The life of the moneymaker is of a sort that is chosen under compulsion of need, and wealth is clearly not the good we are looking for, since it is useful, and for the sake of something else. Hence one might be more inclined to take as ends the things mentioned before, because they are valued for themselves. But it appears that they are not what we are looking for either; and yet there are many established arguments that focus on them. Let these things, then, be set aside. . . .

Chapter 7

Let us go back to the good we are looking for—what might it be? For it appears to be one thing in one activity or sphere of expertise, another in another: It is different in medicine and in generalship, and likewise in the rest. What then is the good that belongs to each? Or is it that for which everything else is done? In medicine this is health, in generalship victory, in housebuilding a house, in some other sphere some other thing, but in every activity and undertaking it is the end; for it is for the sake of this that they all do the rest. The consequence is that if there is some one end of all practical undertakings, this will be the practicable⁷ good,

and if there are more than one, it will be these. Thus as the argument turns in its course, it has arrived at the same point; but we must try even more to achieve precision in this matter.

Since, then, the ends are evidently more than one, and of these we choose some because of something else, as we do wealth, flutes, and instruments in general, it is clear that not all are complete; and the best is evidently something complete. So that if there is some one thing alone that is complete, this will be what we are looking for, and if there are more such things than one, the most complete of these. Now we say that what is worth pursuing for itself is more complete than what is worth pursuing because of something else, and what is never desirable because of something else is more complete than those things that are desirable both for themselves and because of it; while what is complete *without qualification* is what is always desirable in itself and never because of something else. Happiness seems most of all to be like this; for this we do always choose because of itself and never because of something else, while as for honor, pleasure, intelligence, and every excellence, we do choose them because of themselves (since if nothing resulted from them, we would still choose each of them), but we also choose them for the sake of happiness, supposing that we shall be happy through them. But happiness no one chooses for the sake of these things, nor in general because of something else.

The same appears also to follow from considerations of self-sufficiency, for the complete good seems to be self-sufficient. By "self-sufficient" we do not mean sufficient for oneself alone . . . but also for one's parents, children, wife, and generally those one loves, and one's fellow citizens, since man is by nature a civic being. But there must be some limit found here: If the point is extended to ancestors and descendants and loved ones' loved ones, an infinite series will result. But this we must look at on another occasion. The "self-sufficient" we posit [is] what in isolation makes life desirable and lacking in nothing, and we think happiness is like this—and moreover most desirable of all things, it not being counted with other goods. Clearly, if it *were* so counted in with the least of other goods, we would think it more desirable [by the addition of these other goods], for what is added becomes an extra quantity of goods, and the larger total amount of goods is always more desirable. So happiness is clearly something complete and self-sufficient, being the end of our practical undertakings.

But perhaps it appears somewhat uncontroversial to say that happiness is the chief good, and a more distinct statement of what it is is still required. Well, perhaps this would come about if one established the *function* of human beings. For just as for a flute player or a sculptor or any expert, and generally for all those who have some characteristic function or activity, the good—their doing well—seems to reside in their function, so too it would seem to be for the human being, if indeed there is some function that belongs to him. So does a carpenter or a shoemaker have certain functions and activities, while a human being has none, and is by nature a do-nothing? Or just as an eye, a hand, a foot, and generally each and every part of the body appears as having some function, in the same way would one not posit a characteristic function for a human being too, alongside all of these? What, then, should we suppose this to be? Being alive is obviously shared by plants too, and we are looking for what is peculiar to

human beings. In that case we must divide off the kind of life that consists in taking in nutriment and growing. Next to consider would be some sort of life of perception, but this too is evidently shared by horses, oxen, and every other animal. There remains a practical sort of life of what possesses reason; and of this, one element "possesses reason" insofar as it is *obedient* to reason, while the other possesses it insofar as it actually *has* it, and itself thinks. Since this life, too, is spoken of in two ways,⁸ we must posit the *active* life; for this seems to be called a practical life in the more proper sense.

If the function of a human being is activity of soul in accordance with reason, or not apart from reason, and the function, we say, of a given sort of practitioner and a good practitioner of that sort is generically the same, as for example in the case of a cithara player and a good cithara player, and this is so without qualification in all cases, when a difference in respect of excellence is added to the function (for what belongs to the citharist is to play the cithara, to the good citharist to play it well)—if all this is so, and a human being's function we posit as being a kind of life, and this life [is] activity of soul and actions accompanied by reason, and it belongs to a good man to perform these well and finely, and each thing is completed well when it possesses its proper excellence—if all this is so, the human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with excellence (and if there are more excellences than one, in accordance with the best and the most complete). But furthermore it will be this in a complete life. For a single swallow does not make spring, nor does a single day; in the same way, neither does a single day, or a short time, make a man blessed and happy. . . .

Chapter 13

Since happiness is some activity of soul in accordance with complete excellence, we should discuss the subject of excellence; for perhaps in this way we shall get a better view of happiness too. . . .

One aspect of soul is nonrational, while another possesses reason . . . Of the nonrational, one grade looks likely to be shared, and to have to do with growth—by which I mean what is responsible for the taking in of food and for increase in size; for this sort of capacity of soul one would posit as being in all things that take in food, and in embryos, and this same one too as being in them when they are full-grown, for it is more reasonable to suppose the presence of this one than of any other. Excellence in the exercise of this capacity, then, appears to be something shared and not distinctively human. . . .

But another kind of soul also seems to be nonrational, although participating in a way in reason. Take those with and without self-control: We praise their reason and the aspect of their soul that possesses reason; it gives the right encouragement in the direction of what is best. But there appears to be something else besides reason that is naturally in them, which fights against reason and resists it. . . . But this part too seems to participate in reason, as we have said. At any rate, in the self-controlled person it is obedient to reason—and in the

moderate and courageous person it is presumably still readier to listen, for in him it always chimes with reason.

The nonrational, then, too, appears to be double in nature. For the plant-like aspect of soul does not share in reason in any way, while the appetitive and generally desiring part does participate in it in a way, that is, insofar as it is capable of listening to it and obeying it. It is the way one is reasonable when one *takes* account of advice from one's father or loved ones, not when one *has* an account of things, as for example in mathematics. That the nonrational is in a way persuaded by reason is indicated by our practice of admonishing people, and all the different forms in which we reprimand and encourage them. If one should call this too "possessing reason," then the aspect of soul that possesses reason will also be double in nature: One element of it will have it in the proper sense and in itself, another as something capable of listening as if to one's father.

Excellence too is divided according to this difference; for we call some of them intellectual excellences, others excellences of character—intellectual accomplishment, good sense, wisdom on the one hand counting on the side of the intellectual excellences, open-handedness and moderation counting among those of character. For when we talk about character, we do not say that someone is accomplished in a subject or has a good sense of things, but rather that he is mild or moderate. But we do also praise someone accomplished in something for his disposition, and the dispositions we praise are the ones we call excellences.

BOOK II

Chapter 1

Excellence being of two sorts, then, the one intellectual and the other of character, the intellectual sort mostly both comes into existence and increases as a result of teaching (which is why it requires experience and time), whereas excellence of character results from habituation—which is in fact the source of the name it has acquired [*ēthikē*], the word for "character trait" [*ēthos*] being a slight variation of that for "habituation" [*ethos*]. This makes it quite clear that none of the excellences of character come about in us by nature, for no natural way of being is changed through habituation. For example, the stone that by nature moves downwards will not be habituated into moving upwards, even if someone tries to make it so by throwing it upwards ten thousand times, nor will fire move downwards, nor will anything else that is by nature one way be habituated into behaving in another. In that case the excellences develop in us neither by nature nor contrary to nature, but because we are naturally able to receive them and are brought to completion by means of habituation.

Again, in the case of those things that accrue to us by nature, we possess the capacities for them first, and display them in actuality later (something that is evident in the case of the senses: we did not acquire our senses as a result of repeated acts of seeing, or repeated acts of hearing, but rather the other way round—we used them because we had them, rather than acquired them because we used them); whereas we acquire the excellences through having first engaged in the activities. [This] is also the case with the various sorts of expert

knowledge—for the way we learn the things we should do, knowing how to do them, is by doing them. For example, people become builders by building, and cithara players by playing the cithara. So too, then, we become just by doing just things, moderate by doing moderate things, and courageous by doing courageous things. What happens in cities testifies to this: Lawgivers make the citizens good through habituation, and this is what every lawgiver aims at, but those who do it badly miss their mark—and this is what makes one constitution different from another, a good one from a bad one.

Again, it is from the same things and through the same things that every excellence is both produced and destroyed, and similarly every expertise; for it is from playing the cithara that both the good and the bad cithara players come about. So too both with builders and the rest: Good building will result in good builders, bad building in bad ones. If it were not like this, there would be no need at all of anyone to teach them, and instead everyone would just become a good builder or a bad one. This, then, is how it is with the excellences too; for it is through acting as we do in our dealings with human beings that some of us become just and others unjust, and through acting as we do in frightening situations, and through becoming habituated to fearing or being confident, that some of us become courageous and some of us cowardly. A similar thing holds too with situations relating to the appetites, and with those relating to temper: Some people become moderate and mild-tempered, others self-indulgent and irascible, the one group as a result of behaving one way in such circumstances, the other as a result of behaving another way.

We may sum up by saying just that dispositions come about from activities of a similar sort. This is why it is necessary to ensure that the activities be of a certain quality, for the varieties of these are reflected in the dispositions. So it does not make a small difference whether people are habituated to behave in one way or in another way from childhood on, but a very great one; or rather, it makes all the difference in the world. . . .

Chapter 4

But someone may raise a problem about how we can say that to become just, people need to do what is just, and to do what is moderate in order to become moderate; for if they are doing what is just and moderate, they are already just and moderate, in the same way in which, if people are behaving literately and musically, they are already expert at reading and writing and in music.

Or does this fail to hold, in fact, even for skills? One can do something literate both by chance and at someone else's prompting. One will only count as literate, then, if one both does something literate and does it in the way a literate person does it; and this is a matter of doing it in accordance with one's own expert knowledge of letters.

Again, neither do the case of the skills and that of the excellences resemble each other: The things that come about through the agency of skills contain in themselves the mark of their being done well, so that it is enough if they turn out in a certain way, whereas the things that come about in accordance with the excellences count as done justly or moderately not merely because they themselves are

of a certain kind, but also because of facts about the agent doing them—first if he does them knowingly, secondly if he decides to do them and decides to do them for themselves, and thirdly if he does them from a firm and unchanging disposition. When it is a matter of having skills, these conditions are not relevant, except for knowledge itself; but when it comes to having the excellences, knowledge makes no difference, or a small one, whereas the force of the other conditions is not small but counts for everything, and it is these that result from the repeated performance of just and moderate actions. So things done are called just and moderate whenever they are such that the just person or the moderate person would do them; whereas a person is not just and moderate because he does these things, but also because he does them in the way in which just and moderate people do them. . . .

Chapter 6

. . . Every excellence, whatever it is an excellence of, both gives that thing the finish of a good condition and makes it perform its function well, as for example the eye's excellence makes both it and its functioning excellent; for it is through the excellence of the eye that we see well. Similarly the excellence of a horse both makes it an excellent horse and good at running, carrying its rider, and facing the enemy. If, then, this is so in all cases, the excellence of a human being too will be the disposition whereby he becomes a good human being and from which he will perform his own function well. In what way this will be, we have already said, but it will also be clear in this way too—that is, if we consider what sort of nature excellence has.

Now with everything continuous and divisible it is possible to take a greater and a lesser and an equal amount, and these either with reference to the object itself or relative to us. The equal is a kind of intermediate between what exceeds and what falls short. By intermediate "with reference to the object" I mean what is equidistant from each of its two extremes, which is one and the same for all; whereas by intermediate "relative to us" I mean the one that neither goes to excess nor is deficient—and this is not one sort of thing that neither goes to excess nor is deficient—and this is not one thing, nor is it the same for all. So for example if ten count as many and two as few, six is what people take as intermediate with reference to the object, since it exceeds and is exceeded by the same amount; and this is intermediate in terms of arithmetical proportion. But the intermediate relative to us should not be taken in this way; for if ten minas⁹ in weight is a large amount for a particular person to eat and two a small amount, the trainer will not prescribe six minas, because perhaps this too is large for the person who will be taking it, or small—small for Milo,¹⁰ large for the person just beginning his training. Similarly with running and wrestling. It is in this way, then, that every expert tries to avoid excess and deficiency, and looks instead for the intermediate and chooses this—the intermediate, that is, not in the object, but relative to us.

If, then, it is in this way that every kind of expert knowledge completes its function well, by looking to the intermediate and guiding what it produces by reference to this (which is why people are used to saying about products of good quality that nothing can either be taken away from them or added to them, because they suppose that excess and deficiency destroy good quality, while intermediacy preserves it—and skilled experts, as we say, work by looking to this), and if excellence is more precise and better than any expertise, just as nature is, excellence will be effective at hitting upon what is intermediate. I mean excellence of character; for this has to do with affections and actions, and it is in these that there is excess and deficiency, and the intermediate. So, for example, it is possible on occasion to be affected by fear, boldness, appetite, anger, pity, and pleasure and distress in general both too much and too little, and neither is good; but to be affected when one should, at the things one should, in relation to the people one should, for the reasons one should, and in the way one should, is both intermediate and best, which is what belongs to excellence.

In the same way with actions too there is excess, deficiency, and the intermediate. Excellence has to do with affections and actions—things in which excess and deficiency go astray, while what is intermediate is praised and gets it right. . . .

Excellence, then, is a disposition issuing in decisions, depending on intermediacy of the kind relative to us, this being determined by rational prescription and in the way in which the wise person would determine it. And it is intermediacy [because it lies] between two bad states, one involving excess, the other involving deficiency; and also because one set of bad states is deficient, the other excessive, in relation to what is required both in affections and in actions—whereas excellence both finds and chooses the intermediate. Hence excellence, in terms of its essence and the definition that states what it is for excellence to be, is intermediacy; but in terms of what is best, and good practice, it is extremity.

But not every action admits of intermediacy, nor does every affection; for in some cases they have been named in such a way that they are combined with badness from the start, as for example with malice, shamelessness, and grudging ill will; and in the case of actions, fornication, theft, and murder. All these, and others like them, owe their names to the fact that they themselves—not excessive versions of them, or deficient ones—are bad. It is not possible, then, ever to get it right with affections and actions like these, but only to go astray; nor does good practice or the lack of it in relation to such things consist in (for example) fornicating with the woman one should, when one should, and how. Rather, simply doing any one of these things is going astray. . . .

Chapter 7

But we should not simply state this in general terms; we should also show how it fits the particular cases. For with discussions that relate to actions, those of a general sort have a wider application, but those that deal with the subject bit by bit are closer to the truth; for actions have to do with particulars, and the requirement is that we should be in accord on these. So we should take these

cases from the chart.¹¹ Thus with regard to feelings of *fear and boldness*, courage is the intermediate state; while of those people who go to excess, the one who is excessively fearless has no name (many cases are nameless), the one who is excessively bold is rash, and the one who is excessively fearful and deficiently bold is cowardly. With regard to *pleasures and pains*—not all of them, and still less with regard to all pains—the intermediate state is moderation, the excessive state self-indulgence. As for people deficient with regard to pleasures, they hardly occur; which is why people like this, too, have even failed to acquire a name. But let us put them down as “insensate.” With regard to the *giving and receiving of money* the intermediate state is open-handedness, while the excessive and deficient states are wastefulness and avariciousness. But in these states excess and deficiency work in opposite ways: The wasteful person is excessive in handing money out and deficient in taking it, while the avaricious person is excessive in taking it and deficient when it comes to giving it out.