
Aristotle's Ethics

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Basil Blackwell

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Preface

This book is primarily designed to be read in conjunction with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* by those who are not already familiar with Aristotle's writings. It requires no knowledge of the Greek language. Some of the difficulties much discussed by professional scholars are here ignored; to others a solution is offered without reference to divergent views. Where Aristotle's text is readily comprehensible he has been left to speak for himself without comment.

The reader new to Aristotle can find his text very difficult and, indeed, intimidating, especially through the veil of a translation. This book attempts to make clear the general lines of Aristotle's thought rather than to examine the text sentence by sentence; it is offered as an aid to those who read Aristotle's own text, not as a substitute for it. There is no way to make Aristotle easy reading, but he is worth the effort.

The author has followed the ancient literary use of 'man' as a noun of common gender and the convention that the pronoun 'he' refers to persons of both sexes in the absence of contrary indications. He has not the literary skill to write otherwise without intolerable clumsiness of diction. In adopting this style he intends no offence to anyone and hopes that none will be taken.

References

All references in this book are to works of Aristotle and are incorporated in the text. General references to discussions by Aristotle are given in the form (Book I, Chapter 1). References to specific passages are of the form (1234a 12). This literally means that the passage referred to occurs on the 12th line of the left hand column of the 1234th page of Bekker's edition of the Greek text. This pagination is noted in the margins of W. D. Ross's translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which is to be found in the Oxford *Works of Aristotle Translated into English*, Vol. IX, in McKeon (ed.) *Introduction to Aristotle*, and in the *World's Classics* series. Most other texts, both in Greek and English, reproduce it. Where such a reference is given not prefaced by a title, it is to the *Nicomachean Ethics*. References to other works are given in the form (*Physics* 123a 12). All translations are by the author unless otherwise attributed.

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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 learn 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 *Eudemean 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.

1

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