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Aristotle

Eudemian Ethics

Edited by
Brad Inwood and Raphael Woolf



ARISTOTLE

Eudemian Ethics

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Introduction

The opening line of the *Nicomachean Ethics* introduces one of Aristotle's best-known contributions to philosophy: 'Every skill and every enquiry, and similarly every action and rational choice, is thought to aim at some good.' This captures an inspiring and optimistic view of human nature, as does the equally famous opening of the *Metaphysics*, 'All human beings by nature desire to know.' Striving for the good and striving for knowledge are two of the key elements of Aristotle's profound view of what is significant in the life of human beings. Less well known is the emphasis Aristotle places on the role of pleasure, healthy pleasure at least, in a good human life. And that view is featured in the opening sentences of his other major work on happiness and successful human living, the *Eudemian Ethics*. Aristotle criticizes the wise old poet Theognis for driving a wedge between what is pleasant and what is fine and good. 'We should not agree with him. For happiness, being finest and best, is the most pleasant of all things.'

Aristotle's unexpected focus on the pleasantness of the happy life is just one of the many significant, though often subtle, differences between Aristotle's two authoritative books on ethics, distinguished since antiquity by the epithets 'Nicomachean' and 'Eudemian'. These labels allude to his son Nicomachus and his famous student Eudemus of Rhodes. The reason why these two labels were chosen to designate Aristotle's two works on ethics, Aristotle's motivation for writing two different books on the topic, and the relationships between them are all issues mired in uncertainty and controversy. Each of these questions demands proper discussion, but at the outset we want to draw attention

to some important basic facts about Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics* which make it eminently worth reading and indeed studying with as much care and attention as we routinely devote to the *Nicomachean Ethics*. First and foremost, it is important to recognize that the *Eudemian Ethics* is a *complete* treatment of happiness and the good human life, and in our view it was probably the first one Aristotle wrote. And if this is so, then it clearly demands our attention as a discussion of fundamental human values written by one of the great philosophers of the western tradition. But the nature of the work has been controversial, and so we should begin with a bit of background.

The composition and transmission of the *Eudemian Ethics*

Until very recently the claim that the *Eudemian Ethics* is a complete treatise would have been controversial, and in fact the present volume is only the second translation into any language of the whole book as it has come down to us from antiquity.¹ All earlier translations and to this day all editions of the Greek text omit three central books of the *Eudemian Ethics* on the grounds that they are also found in our texts of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. These common books, *Eudemian* IV–VI and *Nicomachean* V–VII, are identical in the two works. The reasons for this unusual state of affairs are not clear, though modern scholarship has recently made dramatic progress on the problem. It was only in 1971 that the eminent German philologist Dieter Harlfinger revealed that the common books were in fact transmitted in a significant number of *Eudemian Ethics* manuscripts;² previously it had been believed that they only appeared in their proper form in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and that the scholars and scribes of antiquity simply cross-referenced the *Nicomachean* books to fill in a gap in the *Eudemian Ethics*. Once that mistake was cleared up, it wasn't long before the English philosopher Anthony Kenny established on objective grounds (using exhaustive, computer-assisted analysis of the Greek style of the works) that the common books must have been composed originally for the *Eudemian*

¹ The first, by Anthony Kenny, appeared in 2011.

² D. Harlfinger, 'Die Überlieferungsgeschichte der Eudemischen Ethik', pp. 1–50 of *Untersuchungen zur Eudemischen Ethik*, ed. P. Moraux and D. Harlfinger (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1971).

Ethics, rather than for the *Nicomachean* work.³ Some interpreters and scholars continue to suspect, not entirely without reason, that the common books may have been somewhat revised for reuse in the *Nicomachean Ethics*,⁴ and we suspend judgement on that relatively minor issue. The crucial fact is that the common books, though they belong to both of Aristotle's *Ethics*, are in their original conception fundamentally *Eudemean* in character.

Because of this unusual historical background, the modern reader of Aristotle's *Eudemean Ethics* needs to have a general view of its history and the state of the text. As readers often notice, one of the striking features of this work is its difficulty, especially when compared to the *Nicomachean Ethics*. And the way the text has come down to us helps to explain why this is so. Like virtually all texts from Graeco-Roman antiquity, Aristotle's works come to us through a long history of copying and recopying by hand, from the time of their original composition until the advent of the printing press in the early modern era. But the *Eudemean Ethics* had a particularly hard journey through history and this affects its current condition. We need to put the *Eudemean Ethics* in context.

Originally, Aristotle's philosophical works were of two kinds. Some were published, that is, made available for a wider reading audience during his lifetime and read routinely through much of antiquity. None of these 'exoteric' or popular works survives today, though ancient comments about them make it clear that they were elegantly written pieces of philosophical literature. The other category of Aristotle's writings consists of treatises that were written primarily for use in his school, either as the basis for lectures or as 'working papers' for his own use and for his fellow philosophers. All of the surviving works by Aristotle fall into this category, including the treatises on ethics.

Aristotle's philosophical career had begun when he arrived in Athens from his home in Macedon in the mid 360s BCE, at the age of about 18. He came to study in Plato's school, the Academy. He worked in the

³ A. Kenny, *The Aristotelian Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1978).

⁴ See, for example, H. Lorenz, 'Virtue of Character in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 37 (2009) 177–212; also J. Cooper 'NE VII.1–2: Introduction, Method, Puzzles', chapter 1 of *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics, Book VII*, ed. Carlo Natali (Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 27, and H. Lorenz, 'NE VII.4: Plain and Qualified Akrasia', chapter 3 of the same.

Academy for about twenty years, until Plato's death. We can be confident that he was an active member of the school and it is likely that some of his earliest technical works have their origin in work that he undertook before Plato died. Though Plato's influence on Aristotle was very strong, he was by no means an uncritical follower and always came to his own opinions on philosophical matters. Aristotle left Athens soon after Plato's death, travelling and working in Asia Minor and in Macedon (where he became tutor to Alexander the Great) for some time. By 335 BCE he was back in Athens and founded his own school, working alongside his student and friend Theophrastus. After Aristotle died in 322 BCE, Theophrastus carried on his work in the school, known as the Lyceum or the Peripatos (hence Aristotelian philosophers in antiquity are often called 'Peripatetics').⁵

Although the history of his school is hard to document in detail, it is clear that for several generations Aristotelian philosophers continued to work in Athens and that in later antiquity his tradition was revived and reinvigorated. During the first few centuries a number of works by his followers crept into the collection of books by Aristotle, and there is still scholarly debate about the detailed fate of his school treatises. But it is abundantly clear that some version of his two major works on ethics was passed down during this period. (In addition to the *Eudemian* and *Nicomachean Ethics* the ancient tradition also preserves some minor works on ethics in the corpus of Aristotle's philosophical books, the 'Great Ethics' (*Magna Moralia*) and the *Virtues and Vices*. Neither of these is by Aristotle himself, though the *Magna Moralia* has been defended as authentic.)

Like other works in the standard corpus of Aristotle, the text of the *Eudemian Ethics* was transmitted in handwritten copies throughout antiquity and the middle ages. The story of how the text of the *Eudemian Ethics* got from Aristotle's own original to modern times is interesting and important for modern readers to understand if they are to appreciate the work today. By and large, the more popular an ancient work was, the more handwritten (manuscript) copies survived past the end of the middle ages to become the basis for our modern texts. Along the way two kinds of changes typically occurred. As in any hand-copying

⁵ For an overview of the school's history, see John Lynch, *Aristotle's School: A Study of a Greek Educational Institution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972).

process, errors of transcription crept in, different errors in different manuscripts. These inevitably multiplied over time as error-infested texts became the basis for new copies, which in turn could introduce fresh errors. At the same time, correction and editing were part of the process in the ancient world, as they are today. The common stereotype of the mechanical and mindless copyist is a misleading half-truth. Commentators, editors and thoughtful scribes worked constantly to improve their texts by reversing the inevitable errors as best they could, often consulting manuscripts other than the one they were copying from.

At this point the history of the *Eudemian Ethics* becomes relevant to the challenges of our modern text of the work. As Anthony Kenny showed in 1978,⁶ it is virtually certain that the *Eudemian Ethics*, in its complete eight-book form, was treated as the standard text of Aristotelian *Ethics* from Aristotle's death in 322 BCE until the time of Aspasius, author of the earliest surviving commentary on Aristotle's *Ethics*, in the early second century CE. We don't know as much as we would like about the state of both versions of the *Ethics*, or about the rest of Aristotle's treatises, in the three centuries after Aristotle's death.⁷ Many seem to have been left in an incomplete state, as is appropriate for the papers of a working philosopher; others were evidently in a more finished form. The evidence we have about the condition of particular texts and the form they took in this period is conflicting and controversial, though as Kenny pointed out, one of our more reliable indications for the state of the ethical works in the period includes mention of an eight-book *Eudemian Ethics* and no reference to a *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁸

For over four hundred years, then, the *Eudemian Ethics* must have been treated with particular interest and care, since it was the standard text. But after Aspasius, Kenny has shown, the ten-book *Nicomachean Ethics* that we know today became the standard text and it was this version which has benefited ever since from the high level of scribal and

⁶ *The Aristotelian Ethics*, ch. 1, especially pp. 29–36.

⁷ There are various legends about the history of Aristotle's works during the Hellenistic period. One rather extreme view was that they were virtually unknown during the period. F. H. Sandbach argues for this in *Aristotle and the Stoics* (Cambridge Philological Society, 1985). For a more measured and up-to-date account of the evidence, see J. Barnes 'Roman Aristotle', chapter 1 of *Philosophia Togata II* ed. Jonathan Barnes and Miriam Griffin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

⁸ Kenny (*Aristotelian Ethics*, 1978), p. 18; the same source lists the *Magna Moralia* in two books, which corresponds exactly to our *Magna Moralia*.

editorial care which the canonical version naturally received. Since then, that is, for well over a thousand years, the manuscripts which form the basis for our *Nicomachean Ethics* received editorial attention of very high quality. The *Eudemian Ethics*, by contrast, inevitably suffered once it was demoted. In manuscripts where both works were copied out there was a tendency to omit the common books from the *Eudemian* version if it followed the *Nicomachean*, and it seems likely that in copies of the *Eudemian Ethics* the common books were sometimes corrected on the basis of the version of those books preserved in the eventually superior *Nicomachean* tradition.

The result of this rather complicated process (the details of which, admittedly, are not agreed on by all scholars) is that the text of our *Nicomachean Ethics* is in relatively good condition, as ancient texts go, while much of the *Eudemian Ethics* is in considerably worse condition, with gaps in the text rather more frequent than we would like and corruptions of Aristotle's original wording that are often quite difficult to repair. The brevity and somewhat choppy quality of the last book may also be the result of this process. On the other hand, to the extent that the common books (*Eudemian Ethics* IV–VI) could be and were corrected from the more attentively edited *Nicomachean* tradition, they are often easier to read than the rest of the *Eudemian* books. Book VII is in particularly bad condition. The only consolation for readers of the *Eudemian Ethics* is the thought that all of that care devoted to editing the *Nicomachean Ethics* in antiquity may in some cases have taken us further away from Aristotle's original words than we are in the *Eudemian Ethics*, for all its difficulties. But here, as in the case of so many other ancient texts, we shall probably never know for sure how far our modern editions have strayed from their ultimate origins.

Though the status of the *Eudemian Ethics* as the original complete version is virtually certain, we cannot be as confident about which version of the *Ethics* came first in Aristotle's philosophical career as we can about the original home of the common books. Kenny, for example, was convinced that the *Eudemian* version was the later (as well as the philosophically superior) work; but the majority view today is that the *Nicomachean Ethics* is the later work. In our view the most important issue is the philosophical relationship between the two versions of the *Ethics*; developmental theories about how and why Aristotle's views changed (to the extent that they did) are not only harder to

defend but also less important to the modern reader, whose proper interest is in Aristotle's views about the good life.

The structure of the *Eudemian Ethics*

Now that we have a general sense of the nature of the *Eudemian Ethics* and can be confident that the common books are an integral part of it, we can turn to the question, what is the plan of the work? Let's begin with a rapid, inevitably superficial, sketch. Aristotle deals first (in Book I) with happiness, its characteristics, how it can be acquired and what kind of life conduces to it. The importance of virtue and wisdom in the best life leads him to discuss those states at some length. Book I contains a certain amount of polemical argument against other views, including the Platonic Form of the Good. Book II begins with a survey of the good things in a human life; some are bodily, some are external to us and some are good features of our soul. It is the last of these, goods of the soul, that merit closest attention, and the most important good of the soul is virtue. The idea of a virtue (or an excellence, that being another translation of the Greek word *aretē*) is based on the notion of a function or use; things that have a proper function or use must also have an excellence – for they can perform their function, that is, be used, either well or badly. Since the soul has functions and can perform them well or badly (as our own experience makes all too evident) it must also be able to have excellences, that is virtues; and activity in accordance with those virtues just is the best thing in a human life, happiness.

After relating this view to a range of widely held opinions (a common feature of Aristotle's philosophical method), he categorizes virtues according to the part of the soul to which they belong (II.I.15). The virtues that count most in human life are those of the distinctively human part of the soul, reason; and these are divided into virtues of character and virtues of intellect. Here too he is relying on an analysis of the soul into its functional parts. It may strike a modern reader as odd to talk about 'parts' of the soul, as if the soul were physical and divisible into distinct components. Aristotle's language of parts, however, can be translated into less physicalist language by matching his 'parts' with distinguishable mental acts or operations. In that sense one part of the soul is rational in that it can think, plan and figure things out, the other is rational in that it can understand and heed that kind of rational

thinking, though it cannot do the planning and analysis itself. This division of the soul into a part which thinks things out and commands and a part which obeys or disobeys (depending on whether it is well or badly conditioned) is fundamental to Aristotle's (and Plato's) conception of human virtue and the good life. In his account of the virtues Aristotle works with one eye on Plato's theories about the soul and virtue, but always takes his own independent position on the important issues.

Virtues of character are discussed first. In general terms they are characterized as mean or intermediate states between extremes; they have a special relationship with pleasure and pain and with habits, all of which play important roles in character formation. The notion that an intermediate state is intrinsically likely to be a good state is part of traditional Greek wisdom. The maxim 'nothing in excess' goes a long way back in Greek culture; it was even carved on the wall of Apollo's temple at Delphi. The same way of thinking was encoded in the medical arts and accepted by Plato too. But Aristotle gave 'the mean' a centrality in his conception of the virtues of character which is quite distinctive. Since the acquisition of virtue is Aristotle's central interest at this point in the *Eudemian Ethics*, the mean gets a prominent discussion (and this leads him to include in tabular form a list of character virtues as intermediate states between excess and deficiency). Before providing a detailed discussion of various virtues of character, Aristotle lays an important foundation for the acquisition of virtue in his detailed and innovative discussion of voluntary and involuntary action (II.6–9), after which he turns at II.10 to the account of decision (*prohairesis*).

It is in Book III that Aristotle begins his survey of the virtues of character. Here, as often, he is influenced by Plato's treatment. In the *Republic* Plato had characterized the good human soul (as well as the good city) as possessing four core or 'cardinal' virtues: wisdom, courage, temperance and justice. Several of these virtues had also been the subject of other Platonic dialogues: for example, temperance in the *Charmides* and courage in the *Laches*. It is with courage that Aristotle begins his own analysis of the virtues, before moving on to temperance (*sōphrosunē*), at III.2, a short discussion which nevertheless lays the groundwork for later analysis of the relationship between desire and reason. He continues with mildness in III.3, great-heartedness in III.4–5, magnificence in III.6 and a number of minor virtues of character in III.7. Aristotle concludes the book with further reflections on character virtue as a

mean. Book iv is entirely occupied with an intricate analysis of the third cardinal virtue, justice. Aristotle's analysis of justice is one of his finest pieces of work and it has been highly influential in modern legal and political theory.

The last of the set of four cardinal virtues developed in Plato's *Republic*, which became the standard set for later ancient philosophy, is rather different from the first three, which are all virtues of character. Wisdom (*phronēsis*) and expertise (*sophia*) are different, since they are excellences of the strictly rational part of the soul, and so in Book v Aristotle turns to the virtues of intellect. These are the last of the virtues proper to be analysed, and intellectual excellence is exhaustively categorized; the detail and fineness of his distinctions are characteristic of Aristotle's approach to philosophical problems. More than Plato, Aristotle draws a sharp line between theoretical and practical uses of the intellect and the range and variety of excellences discussed in this book is impressive.

By the end of Book v, then, Aristotle has covered, among other things, the four cardinal virtues set out by Plato in the *Republic* and added some characteristic elaborations and emphases of his own. We have already noticed that temperance gets a relatively short treatment, something perhaps explained by Aristotle's expansive interest in the problems of self-control and the lack of it elsewhere in the *Eudemian Ethics*, and the massive discussions of justice and the intellectual virtues – both of which are also prominent in the *Republic*.

In the remaining three books Aristotle tackles some vitally important ancillary aspects of the happy life. Book vi begins with a focus on types of deficient character (vice, failure of self-control and brutishness). The greatest emphasis is on the topic of self-control and the failure of self-control. These are themes that rely heavily on the earlier discussions of voluntary action, decision and the relationship between intellectual and affective states of the soul. Aristotle is particularly concerned with what happens when we fail to do what we rationally plan or decide to do, usually as a result of overwhelming desires. In his *Protagoras* Plato had portrayed Socrates debating whether it was even possible that a firm rational resolution based on knowledge could be overturned by desire and Aristotle was eager to show how this obvious and frequent occurrence could be accounted for using his own account of how reasoning and desire interact in human action. Book vi concludes with a detailed

analysis of pleasure, something the reader has long been expecting given the importance of pleasure in many parts of the previous discussion. Given the prominence, early in the treatise, of pleasure as a component of the good life, it is no surprise that Aristotle here defines pleasure as a kind of activity of a healthy organism.

Book VII is entirely devoted to the theme of friendship, clearly one of the most important features of any happy human life. Plato had devoted a dialogue, the *Lysis*, to the topic of friendship, but not untypically, the participants are unable to reach a determinate conclusion about its nature. Aristotle offers a more systematic treatment. Friendship comes in three varieties. Some friendships are based on the utility that friends can offer to each other, often asymmetrically; others are based on pleasure; in its best form, friendship between two people is based on shared virtue and shared activities. This form of friendship raises a variety of puzzles that Aristotle discusses at considerable length. He is particularly concerned to sort out the conflicting intuitions we might have about the value of friendship to a virtuous person with the ideal of complete self-sufficiency.

Book VIII, which completes the treatise, seems somewhat fragmented and it is certainly unusually short. It is convenient to regard it as three separate essays on miscellaneous topics (not in itself an unusual way for Aristotelian treatises to end). VIII.1 tackles the old Socratic problem of whether virtue is a form of knowledge, and is a kind of corollary to the discussion of the failure of self-control in Book VI. In VIII.2 Aristotle explores the role of good fortune in a happy life, a significant topic since some of the good things which contribute to a happy life are indeed dependent on factors beyond our personal control. The final chapter in the *Eudemian Ethics* provides the reader with a general account of the ideal human character and the best condition of human life, an all-inclusive virtue which Aristotle calls 'nobility' or 'the fine and good'. The relation of this ideal to goods other than those of character is then explored in two ways. True nobility is contrasted to the kind of utilitarian understanding of virtue characteristic of Spartan culture (in which virtue is valued for the sake of its role in providing us with external and bodily goods). After a reminder that the happy life consists in certain activities (which are pleasant because pleasure just is a certain kind of activity – as explained in Book VI), the proper way of relating to such bodily and external goods (including friends), which he

here calls 'natural goods', is laid down. The right amount is what our rational decisions indicate it to be after due reflection and analysis; rather surprisingly, the proper reference point for such decisions is god. Aristotle explains what he means as follows (VIII.3.16–17):

Whatever choice and acquisition of natural goods (either goods of the body or money or friends or other goods) will most effectively produce contemplation of god, that is the best and this is the finest limit; and whatever choice and acquisition of natural goods impedes, either by deficiency or by excess, our cultivation and contemplation of god, is base. And this applies to the soul, and it is the best limit for the soul when one is least aware of the irrational part of the soul as such.

Thus Aristotle concludes his treatise on the good life with a decisive statement about the importance of reasoning about natural goods in achieving happiness. He clearly integrates a characteristic emphasis on unimpeded action with his focus on mean or moderate states that avoid excess and deficiency, and in the conclusion of the *Eudemian Ethics* he shows how human excellence depends on a recognition of the superiority of the divine and its indispensable role in the constitution of the best human life.

Distinctive features of the *Eudemian Ethics*

Many of Aristotle's works show signs of having been partially revised and touched up by Aristotle himself as his thoughts on a subject developed. He wrote two versions of his *Ethics*, and there must have been a reason for him to compose a wholly new version rather than just a revision of the old one. Scholars and philosophers who take an interest in the full range of his ethical thought are bound to focus on the salient differences between the two versions of the *Ethics*, and probably have done so since antiquity. For example, whoever wrote the *Magna Moralia* seems to have followed the *Eudemian* version closely while still turning to the *Nicomachean Ethics* for some points; as clumsy as this author sometimes seems to be, he evidently was thinking about the relation between the two works. Even if we cannot be certain about Aristotle's actual motivation for writing two versions of his ethics, or about the order in which he wrote the works, it is still important to indicate some

of the more significant differences between them, though an adequate account of these differences remains a project for serious and on-going philosophical research.

Six general issues, all of them important for understanding Aristotle's thoughts on the good life, suggest themselves in this connection:

1. The role of political science in relation to ethics.
2. The contributions of theoretical and practical reason in the happy life.
3. The nature of pleasure and its relationship to the goal of life (the *telos*).
4. The nature of friendship.
5. The nature of voluntary action.
6. Philosophical method.

1. *The role of political science in relation to ethics*: A reader who approaches the *Nicomachean Ethics* after reading the *Eudemian* will be struck first by a new emphasis on the importance of politics as an overarching study, the master science which is authoritative and goal-setting for those studies ranged under it, including ethics. Aristotle is explicit on this point in *NE* 1.2 and at the end of the work he returns again to political theory and to his research programme on the natures of various political systems. The final chapter of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a whole addresses an important practical question that had long been thought to be in the realm of statecraft and political leadership. Considerations of politics are of course present in the *Eudemian* version too, inevitably given Aristotle's conviction that human beings are *polis*-dwelling animals by nature. But at no point in the *Eudemian Ethics* does he make politics the overarching and agenda-setting science that shapes how ethics is to be conceived. In fact, where the issue arises in the *Eudemian Ethics* he assigns the role of superordinate science to three disciplines taken together: politics, household management, and *phronēsis*, i.e., wisdom, the intellectual virtue which governs individual practical and ethical decisions (1.8.20).

Rather, it is that for the sake of which, in the sense of the goal, that is the best thing and the cause of what is subordinate to it and the first of all things. Hence the good itself would be this: the goal of all that is achievable by human action. This is what falls under the science that has authority over all sciences; this science is politics and household management and wisdom.