CHAPTER 1

Reading Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics

THE BASIC STRUCTURE OF THE *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS*

The *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle tells us, is a search or an investigation (1.6.1096a12; b35; 1102a13). It poses a question at the start, looks at various possible answers along the way, and concludes with a definite judgment. The treatise therefore has something of the shape of a detective story.

What Aristotle tells us he is looking for, and what he wants us to join with him in looking for, is what he calls the "ultimate goal" of human life. Informally, we might think of this as what counts as "doing well" in life, or what it is for someone to be in the true sense "a success." To attain our ultimate goal is to achieve "happiness." Practically speaking, the ultimate goal in life is something toward which we would do well to direct everything else that we do. We reasonably *prefer* this to anything else. Our ultimate goal, we might think, is something we can *rest satisfied in*: when we attain it, we require nothing more.

Is there such a goal which is the same for all, and, if so, what is it? This is the basic question of the *Ethics*.

It is useful to think of any search as involving four basic elements. Suppose, for instance, that a detective wished to establish the identity of a person who committed a murder. First, she would formulate a description of the murderer, or *criteria* that the murderer satisfied: she might have deduced, for instance, from examining the crime scene, that the murderer wore cowboy boots and walked with a limp. Secondly, she would draw up a list of suspects, or a *field of search* – those people who just possibly committed the murder. Thirdly, she would question and *examine* those suspects one by one. While doing

so – and this is the fourth step – she would *apply her criteria*, seeing whether they picked out just one suspect as the murderer, the suspect who, as it turns out, wears cowboy boots and walks with a limp.[1]

Aristotle's search for the ultimate goal of human life follows similar lines. First, at the beginning of the *Ethics*, he formulates criteria which, he thinks, an ultimate goal must satisfy: he maintains that it must be *most ultimate*; *self-sufficient*; and *most preferable* (1.7.1097a25–b21).[2] Secondly, he identifies a field of search: in the famous Function Argument of 1.7 (1097b22–1098a20) he argues that our ultimate goal is to be found among those activities that we can perform only through our having good traits of character, or the virtues. This is what he means when he says, in the oft-cited tag, that the highest human good is "activity in accordance with virtue" (1098a16–17). Thirdly, he proceeds to examine one by one the virtues and their characteristic activities, such as courage, generosity, and justice. This project occupies the bulk of the treatise, books 3–6. Fourthly and finally, after looking at some supplemental topics, Aristotle applies his original criteria and argues in 10.6–8 that the intellectual activity which is an expression of the virtue of "philosophical wisdom" (*sophia*) is the ultimate goal of human life:

> The activity that we carry out with our minds, a kind of perceptual activity,[3] seems to excel over all others in goodness. It aims at no goal beyond itself. It has its distinctive pleasure (which augments the activity). And, clearly, the self-sufficiency, freedom from necessity, effortlessness of the sort that human nature can attain, and anything else that is attributed to a blessedly happy person, are achieved through this activity. This, then, would be a human being's ultimate happiness . . . (10.7.1177b19–26)

Thus, the *Ethics* consists of three main sections, as well as a fourth, which discusses side topics. An outline of the treatise would look something like this:

THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF HUMAN LIFE
  Criteria and Field of Search (1.1–12)

[1] Of course it might happen that more than one suspect met the criteria.
[2] We shall look at these criteria more closely in the next chapter.
[3] Aristotle strictly says that this sort of activity is "theoretical" or "contemplative," that is, it is a kind of seeing or insight. At this point, it is least misleading to call this a kind of perception, not meaning by this any sort of *sense* perception.

THE VIRTUES AND THEIR CHARACTERISTIC ACTIONS
- The Origin, Definition, and Classification of Virtue (1.13, book 2)
- The Relationship between Virtue and Action (3.1–5)
- The Virtues (3.6–6.13)
  - A. Character-Related Virtues
    1. Courage (3.6–9)
    2. Moderation (3.10–12)
    3. Generosity (4.1)
    4. Magnificence (4.2)
    5. Magnanimity (4.3)
    6. Minor character-related virtues (4.4–9)
    7. Justice (5.1–11)
  - B. Thinking-Related Virtues (6.1–13)
    1. Demonstrative knowledge (6.3)
    2. Craftsmanship (6.4)
    3. Administrative skill (6.5)
    4. Good intuition (6.6)
    5. Philosophical wisdom (6.7)
    6. Minor thinking-related virtues (6.9–11)

SIDE TOPICS
- Self-Control and Lack of Self-Control (7.1–10)
- Bodily Pleasure (7.11–14)
- Friendship (8.1–9.12)
- Pleasure Generally (10.1–5)

HAPPINESS RECONSIDERED (10.6–8)[4]

THE FUNDAMENTAL IDEA OF THE ETHICS

But if the treatise is a search for our ultimate goal, then why – we might wonder – is it called a treatise on "ethics"? Does "ethics" not have to do with obligations, rules, principles, and duties? Why not

[4] The last chapter of the treatise, 10.9, seems to be a transitional chapter, the purpose of which is to argue that the study of the ultimate good for a human being leads naturally into the study of laws and political institutions. It links the *Ethics* to the *Politics*.

call it instead a treatise on "the purpose of human life," or "what we should all be striving for"?

The treatise gets its name because of the *manner* in which Aristotle searches for the ultimate goal. As was mentioned, Aristotle holds that our ultimate end is to be found among those of our actions that we can carry out only as a result of having good traits of character, or the virtues. And the Greek word which means "pertaining to traits of character" is *ēthikē*, the source of our word "ethics." Aristotle's treatise is about "ethics," then, in the historic and original sense of that term.[5] (It is called "*Nicomachean*" after Aristotle's son, Nicomachus, but whether because it was dedicated to Nicomachus or because Nicomachus was the editor, we do not know.)

But this only leads to the more important question: why does Aristotle hold that our ultimate goal is "activity in accordance with virtue"? Since this is perhaps the most distinctive and fundamental claim of the *Ethics*, it is good to have an initial understanding of what Aristotle meant by it, and what his reasons were for his holding it. I shall examine these matters more carefully in the next chapter, but a brief introduction is useful here.

Aristotle's claim is based on a principle which he takes over from Plato and which might be called the "Interdefinability of Goodness, Virtue, and Function." By the "function" (*ergon*, literally "work" or "task") of a thing, understand its characteristic activity or achievement. According to Plato, we can identify the function of a thing by considering what that sort of thing alone can achieve, or can achieve better than anything else (*Republic* 352e). For instance, the "function" of a knife is to cut: cutting is something that a knife alone achieves, or achieves better than any other available instrument.[6] If you were to pick your way through a drawer in a kitchen, from the shape of a knife you might be able to see that its distinctive task is to cut; some other implement is designed to crush garlic; something else works to flip pancakes or hamburgers; and so on. You could hardly cut an apple with a flipper, or crush garlic with a paring

[5] This in turn should serve as a warning in our approach to the treatise: we should not presume at the start that Aristotle is concerned with what *we* mean by "morality" and "ethics."

[6] The point is even clearer with specialized knives: you will not be able to prune a tree, or prune it well, except with a pruning knife.

knife, or flip pancakes with a garlic press. Each sort of implement has its own job to do, and this is its "function." Plato and Aristotle look at the kinds of things that exist in nature in much the same way. A kind of thing would not exist, unless it had some distinctive role to play.

Clearly a thing carries out its "function," in this sense, either well or badly: one knife cuts well; another cuts poorly. What explains the difference? A knife that cuts well will have features or "traits" that make it cut well; a knife that cuts poorly will lack those same features – such things, obviously, as the blade's *taking a sharp edge*; its *holding a sharp edge*; its *having the right shape and size* for the sort of cutting it is supposed to do (small and thin for paring; large and wedge-shaped for dicing; etc.); and so on. It was natural for a Greek speaker of Aristotle's time to call these traits, which make a thing do its work well, the "virtues" of a thing of that sort.

The relevant Greek word is *aretē*, which means broadly any sort of excellence or distinctive power. In Aristotle's time, the term would be applied freely to instruments, natural substances, and domestic animals – not simply to human beings. If you were going into battle, for instance, you would seek a horse with "virtue," in order to draw a chariot that had "virtue," made of materials that had the relevant "virtues." The term connoted strength and success, as also did the Latin term *virtus*. Our English word, too, in its origin had similar connotations. Something of this original significance is still preserved in such idioms as "in virtue of": "The knife cuts *in virtue of* its sharpness."[7]

Any knife that has all of these good traits, and any other "virtues" that it should have, will as a result be a *good* knife, whereas a knife

[7] Because the Greek, *aretē*, could be applied in this wide-ranging way but it is no longer natural to use our word "virtue" in this way, some commentators recommend that *aretē* be translated instead as "excellence." The term "excellence" makes it clear at once that *aretē* is not a specifically moral term, and that it has something to do with distinction and special achievement. Yet it could be said, as against this, that it is likewise unnatural for us to use "excellence" to refer to such traits as generosity and justice. And, as I said, the English term "virtue" is not lacking in suggestions of strength and power. My own view is that it is better to try to reclaim the word "virtue," restoring it in part to its earlier meaning, by deliberately retaining the word in discussions of Greek ethics – keeping in mind all along what the term actually means.

that noticeably lacks one of them will be a *bad* knife. If this is so, then the notions of *function*, *kind*, *virtue*, and *goodness* are interdefinable, a relationship which can be expressed in the following claim:

The Interdefinability of Goodness, Function, and Virtue. A *good* thing of a certain kind is that which has the *virtues* that enable it to carry out its *function* well.

A second important principle that Aristotle presupposes is that there is some close relationship between *goals* and *goods*: he believes that for something *to be a good* simply is for it, somehow, *to be a goal*. (This claim, in contrast, seems *not* to have come from Plato. It looks to be original with Aristotle, even though in the opening of the *Ethics* he denies special credit for the insight.)

Suppose now that we take a goal to be *something at which other things are directed*. It would follow that the good of a thing would be that at which other things involving it would be directed. Consider the parts of a knife, for instance. We see that they are designed so that each contributes to the task of cutting: the knife has a blade of a certain length, which is made out of a particular material, and is mounted on a handle in a certain way, all so that it can cut. The goal of a knife, then, would seem to involve cutting. If a goal is a good, then the good of a knife would seem to involve cutting. It is odd, perhaps, to say that something like a knife has a good. But then we might say that if a knife were a living thing, then its good would be to cut. What it would aim to do, the achievement it would most basically seek, would be somehow to engage in cutting.

Of course, a rusty or broken knife will not cut very well or safely. A knife with a dull blade might not even be able to cut at all. We could hardly tell the function of a broken knife, and it would seem misguided in any case to say that it attains the goal of a knife. We would not look to a broken or rusty knife to see what the point of a knife was. So it seems more appropriate to say that the goal or good of a knife is not simply *cutting*, but rather *cutting well*.

However, to cut is the function of a knife, and, as I have said, something carries out its function *well* only through its having the "virtues" of that kind of thing. Thus, it would be most appropriate to say that the ultimate goal of a knife is to engage in cutting *in the way*

that a knife cuts when it has the "virtues" of a knife. Consider the difference between a knife in a good condition – sharpened, safely constructed, and well maintained – and a knife in a bad condition – rusty, poorly made, or damaged. Consider the difference that being in good condition makes for cutting: what the good knife can achieve that the bad knife cannot. The ultimate goal or good of a knife will be located, then, precisely in that difference of achievement. The ultimate goal or good of a knife will consist in what a knife can achieve precisely through its being sharp, safely constructed, and well maintained.

The *Ethics* is essentially Aristotle's application of a similar line of thought to human beings rather than knives. Aristotle thinks that, however much we might disagree about the justice or rightness of particular actions, we find ourselves in general agreement as to what counts as a good human being. This is reflected in how we use the word "good": we are generally agreed in applying the word "good" only to those persons who have such traits as generosity, courage, fairness, and so on, and who do not noticeably have any traits that are contrary to these. We do not disagree that the fact that someone is generous or fair-minded provides us, to that extent, with a reason for calling that person "good."

So we are generally agreed, Aristotle thinks, on what counts as a good trait or "virtue." But the line of thought developed above would indicate that the ultimate goal of a human being, just like that of anything else, would consist in our carrying out our function well; and our carrying out that function well, as in other cases, is found in what we can achieve precisely through our having those traits that make us good: the "virtues" of human beings. Thus, Aristotle thinks, the way to become clearer about the ultimate goal of human life is to examine more carefully what it is we can achieve or carry out precisely through our having the virtues. The human good will be found among activities such as these, just as the point of being a knife can be discerned in what it is that a good knife in particular can accomplish.

This is the fundamental idea of the *Ethics*, and this is why Aristotle devotes the bulk of the treatise to a careful – and, he thinks, *exhaustive* – examination of the various human virtues and their characteristic actions.

A FIRST DIFFICULTY – AND THEN FOUR OTHERS

Selection or Collection?

Yet as soon as this fundamental idea is sketched, an ambiguity appears in what I have said. I said that Aristotle thinks that our ultimate goal will be found among those of our actions that we can do only as a result of our having good traits of character. But "among" could mean either of two things – either that *one* such action is our ultimate goal, or that *all* such actions are our ultimate goal. Either there is just one virtue, such that the actions that we can achieve through having that particular virtue constitute our ultimate goal; or any virtue is such that the actions that we can accomplish only through having that virtue constitute our ultimate goal. On the former, we are looking for one sort of virtuous activity as being the ultimate goal; on the latter, we are looking for every sort of virtuous activity as belonging to the ultimate goal. On the former, we should identify the ultimate goal by "selecting out" one activity in accordance with virtue; on the latter, we do so by "collecting together" all such activities. Is Aristotle advocating that we settle the matter by Selection or by Collection?

Here is an analogy. Suppose someone were to say, "The ultimate goal of a physician is to heal patients by employing medical skill of the best sort." That is a vague claim so far, because we do not know what "medical skill of the best sort" is. Suppose that the person who makes this claim then goes on to discuss all the various types of medical skill: skill in setting bones; skill in treating intestinal problems; skill in brain surgery; and so on. When he has finished enumerating and examining all of the specialties and sub-specialties in medicine, he could do either of two things. He could select out one such skill and say something like the following: "The best sort of medical skill is seen in the work of a brain surgeon, since brain surgery aims at health in the best and most important part of the body." Or he could collect together all of these skills and maintain: "The best sort of medical skill is found in someone who combines into one all of these various abilities – a family practitioner – since that sort of physician aims at all-round healthiness."

In the same way, it is not entirely clear whether Aristotle examines the various virtues and their activities with a view to selecting out one

of them or collecting all of them together. This is a fairly well-worn controversy among scholars, and standard names have been given to the different views. An interpretation of the *Ethics* which takes Aristotle to be selecting out one sort of virtuous activity is typically called a "Dominant End" or "Intellectualist" interpretation ("Intellectualist" on the grounds that that activity is distinctive of the human intellect). An interpretation which takes Aristotle to be collecting together all virtuous activities (and perhaps even including other things besides) is typically called an "Inclusivist" or "Comprehensivist" interpretation.

At first glance, it looks as though the *Ethics* has no uniform view. In book 10, as we saw, it looks as though Aristotle intends to *select*: the ultimate goal of human life, he maintains there, is the sort of activity we can engage in through having the virtue of philosophical wisdom (*sophia*). But book 1, with its famous Function Argument, and also the fundamental idea which motivates the treatise would seem to commit Aristotle to *collection*: if the ultimate goal of human life is what a good human being can achieve through his having the virtues, and if there are many virtues, then the ultimate goal of human life, it seems, should include *any* sort of action that we accomplish through our having a virtue. And it is difficult to understand how virtuous actions could otherwise have the weight that they do for Aristotle: as we shall see, he thinks we should do them for their own sake, and that frequently we should be prepared even to die rather than do something contrary to a virtue. But why should this be appropriate, unless *all* such actions were somehow included in our ultimate goal?

A complicating problem is that Aristotle himself seems aware of the ambiguity of Selection versus Collection, and he seems even deliberately to cultivate or prolong the ambiguity. Consider the following passages:

> The human good turns out to be activity in accordance with virtue, and if the virtues are several, then in accordance with the best and most ultimate virtue. (1.7.1098a16–18)

> All these things [sc. goodness, usefulness, pleasure] belong to the best sorts of activities, and these, or the best one of them, we claim, is happiness. (1.8.1099a29–31)

> And presumably it's even necessary, if there are unimpeded activities corresponding to each condition, that, regardless of whether happiness is the activity of all of them or of some particular one of them, that, if it's unimpeded, it's the most preferable thing. (7.13.1153b9–14)

> Regardless, then, of whether the activities of a mature and blessedly happy human being are of one sort or are several in kind, the pleasures that bring these to completion would properly be said to be "human pleasures." (10.5.1176a26–28)

It has frequently been pointed out that Selection and Collection need not be regarded as exclusive. Aristotle's view of the human good might be that it consists of a variety of activities, but as having a certain ordering, with only one such activity being first or at the top. Happiness for us, then, would be to engage in that first-ranked activity, while having all the other virtues and putting them into practice as appropriate. So perhaps Aristotle does not regard Selection and Collection as exclusive; perhaps he prolongs the ambiguity because he thinks he never needs to dispel it.

The Problem of Order

And yet, if we accept this solution, we seem to be led directly into another difficulty, which similarly seems to make its appearance at various points in the treatise. We may call it the "Problem of Order."

The problem arises in the following way. There are many things that we apparently do for their own sake, for instance, watching a good movie; solving a puzzle for the fun of it; or giving someone a gift as a "random act of kindness." Aristotle, in fact, goes so far as to say that every truly virtuous act is carried out for its own sake (2.4.1105a32). Apparently his view is that there cannot be "ulterior motives" behind a truly generous action: we perform such an action simply to "show generosity" (as we might say), because it is an inherently good thing to be generous.

This attitude seems fairly important in friendship as well. In a true friendship, Aristotle says, we show affection for another person "for his own sake": we recognize his good traits; appreciate and admire them; and then we want to benefit him somehow, simply because of what we like about him (cf. 8.2.1155b31, 8.3.1156b10). Clearly, "ulterior motives" have no place in a true friendship: it is not a true