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ARISTOTLE
Nicomachean Ethics

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ROGER CRISP

St Anne's College, Oxford



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Introduction

‘All human beings, by their nature, desire understanding.’ The first sentence of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is paradigmatically true of its author. He sought to understand, and to help others to understand, logic, mathematics, the nature of reality, physics, knowledge, the mind, language, biology, physiology, astronomy, time, theology, literature, rhetoric, the nature of human happiness, and much else. A full translation of his works – of which only one fifth has survived – runs to over one-and-a-half million words.

Aristotle was born in Stagira, in Macedonia (now northern Greece), in 384 BCE. His father was a doctor, and this may partly explain his fondness for medical analogies in the *Ethics* (see, e.g., 1138b). Aristotle arrived in Athens in 367, and spent the next twenty years there as a member of Plato’s Academy. Plato died in 347, and Aristotle left Athens for thirteen years, during some of which he was tutor to Alexander. In 334 he founded the Lyceum in Athens, remaining there till shortly before his death in 322.

The *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*, or the ‘*Ethics*’) is almost certainly the product of Aristotle’s developed intellect, consisting in a revision of around 330 of his earlier *Eudemian Ethics* (though some scholars believe the *Eudemian* to be later, and indeed better). *NE* contains ten books, of which three – books v–vii – are shared with the *Eudemian Ethics*, and usually thought to belong to that earlier work. Another work on ethics traditionally ascribed to Aristotle – the *Magna Moralia* – is now generally considered not to have been written by him, but perhaps by a student of his. Like most of his works, the *Ethics* was not written for

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publication, consisting rather in a full set of lecture notes, on which Aristotle would doubtless have expanded.

NE is the ethical work of Aristotle's which dominated later discussion. It had a great influence on the schools of thought that developed soon after his death, Stoicism and Epicureanism in particular. It was the subject of scholarly commentaries throughout the early middle ages, and was widely read in the West from the twelfth century. As Jonathan Barnes has put it, 'An account of Aristotle's intellectual afterlife would be little less than a history of European thought.'¹ His influence on contemporary moral philosophy remains significant, and I shall say a little more about this below.

The audience for Aristotle's lectures would have consisted primarily of young men, though not so young that their attendance would have been fruitless (see, e.g., I.3, 1095a). Most of them would have been of less than humble origin, and might have hoped to make their way in a career in public life. They were people who could have made a difference, and Aristotle is insistent that his lectures are practical in intent (e.g., II.2, 1103b). It is sometimes said that Aristotle's ethical views are mere Athenian common sense dressed in philosophical garb. Certainly, some of Aristotle's views, as one would expect, are unreflectively adopted from the culture in which he lived, and at times, as in his discussion of 'greatness of soul' in IV.3, he can seem the outsider concerned to demonstrate that he is more establishment than the establishment. But Aristotle, like Socrates and Plato before him, believed that certain aspects of the morality of Athens were deeply mistaken, and sought to persuade his audience of that, and to live their lives accordingly.

Socrates had died in 399, when Plato was twenty-nine. Most of what we know of Socrates comes from Plato's dialogues. A central Socratic tenet was that moral virtue consists in knowledge, so that one who acts wrongly or viciously acts from ignorance. The Socratic conception of happiness linked it closely with virtue and knowledge. When Socrates is condemned to death, he chooses to remain in Athens, thinking virtue to be 'the most valuable human possession'.² Plato continued the Socratic tradition, identifying moral virtue with an ordering of the soul in which reason governs the emotions and appetites to the advantage of the virtuous person. Aristotle can be seen as following the same agenda,

¹ J. Barnes, *Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 86.

² Plato, *Crito* 53c7.

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asking the same sorts of ethical questions and using the same concepts, though he does also employ philosophical apparatus developed in other areas of his thought (e.g., the activity/process distinction put to use in his analysis of pleasure). Arguably (a word always to be assumed when an interpretation of Aristotle is asserted), two aspects of Aristotle's ethics set him apart from Socrates and Plato: an emphasis on virtuous activity as opposed, on the one hand, to merely possessing the virtue, and, on the other, to other candidates as components of happiness, such as pleasure. For Aristotle, happiness consists in, and only in, virtuous activity.

Aristotle's method also contrasts with those of Socrates and Plato. The Socratic method consisted in the asking of questions of the 'What is X?' variety. Definitions of virtue, justice, courage, or whatever, would then be subjected to criticism by Socrates, ending in a state of puzzlement, which is at least one step further on from false belief. Socrates' own views are stated through indirection, embedded in his questions and his often ironic responses to proffered answers. In his earlier dialogues, Plato follows the same method vicariously, in his portrayals of the relentlessly interrogative Socrates. He later developed sophisticated and radical metaphysical and moral views, but we are still distanced from their author through his continued use of the dialogue form. One difficult question any student of ancient philosophy must face is that of the relation between the real Socrates, Socrates the character in Plato's dialogues, and Plato himself.

Aristotle, however, says straightforwardly what he thinks. He saw himself as working within a philosophical tradition, the views of the other participants in which are to be taken very seriously. Given the propensity of all human beings to seek understanding, the views of common sense are also worth considering. Aristotle suggests four stages in dealing with a philosophical problem (VII.1, 1145b; cf. X.8, 1179a). First, decide on the area of inquiry (e.g., incontinence). Secondly, set out the views of the many and the wise (e.g., the ordinary view that incontinence is common, and the Socratic view that it is impossible for knowledge to be overcome). Thirdly, note any puzzles that arise, such as the conflict between the ordinary and the Socratic views. Finally, resolve these as best one can (e.g. there is such a thing as incontinence, but only perceptual knowledge, not knowledge of any ethical universal, is overcome (VII.3, 1147b)).

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Aristotle does not himself always keep to this method. Sometimes he just offers argument, without reference to the views of the many or the wise, and this argument may make use of technical notions of his own. But even here his conclusions are occasionally tested at the bars of philosophy and of common sense. In 1.7, 1098a, for example, Aristotle concludes, using the notion of a human's 'characteristic activity' arrived at via an argument by elimination, that happiness consists in the exercise of virtue. This conclusion is then tested in the following chapter, where he finds it to be consistent with long-standing philosophical views about happiness, and to include elements of common conceptions of happiness, such as pleasure.

It might be thought that Aristotle's method is implicitly conservative, because it puts so much weight on already existing views. But he is in fact quite prepared to go beyond these views. His positions on happiness, for example, or on democracy are quite radical. Aristotle's method is not based on mere attachment to the way things are, but on a teleological conception of humanity as functionally directed towards inquiry and the truth.

Happiness

The first chapter of what is now seen as one of the most significant works of moral philosophy in the twentieth century, W. D. Ross's *The Right and the Good*, is called 'The Meaning of the Right'.³ Ross was a great Aristotelian scholar, but his primary interest in ethics was right action. The first sentence of Aristotle's *Ethics*, however, concerns the good, and it soon becomes clear that his focus is initially on the nature of the human good, or human happiness (*eudaimonia*).

This is indeed typical of ancient Greek ethics, and it raises the question whether such ethics, by concerning itself at the start with the agent's own good, is egoistic. Aristotle's ethics is not egoistic in the sense of advocating constant, self-conscious, deliberate self-seeking behaviour. According to Aristotle, you should be concerned about your friend *for his sake*, i.e., not for yours. But there is nothing in Aristotelian ethics inconsistent with the idea that all your reasons for action, or for living a certain kind of life or for being a certain kind of person,

³ W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930).

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ultimately rest on the advancement of your own good. Nowhere in Aristotle is there a recommendation of any kind of genuine self-sacrifice.

There has been a tendency in modern ethics to concentrate on actions. Ancient writers clearly thought about right action, but were more ready to discuss lives as a whole. In 1.5, 1095b, Aristotle introduces a standard trichotomy: the lives of gratification, politics, and study. He rules out the first as bestial and unworthy of a human being. The life of politics he takes more seriously, though he is at pains to stress that its aim should not be honour or even virtue (because one can be virtuous without what really matters, viz., the doing of virtuous actions). Aristotle also rules out the life of business, since money is merely instrumental to other goods. Aristotle believed that the good should be attainable in ordinary human activity, and spends a chapter (1.6) dismissing the Platonic idea of the 'Form' of the good as something independent of such activity.

There is a difference between the *concept* of happiness, and various *conceptions* of it. If you and I are having a discussion about what human happiness consists in, we use the same concept of happiness. That is, we attach roughly the same sense to the word 'happiness', and it is this that enables us to engage in discussion. But we may well have different conceptions, that is, views about what happiness actually consists in. In his account, Aristotle moves between spelling out the implications of the concept, which he believes put constraints on any plausible conception, and offering arguments for his own conception of happiness itself. In an important chapter, 1.7, Aristotle tells us that happiness is 'complete'. Since the beginning of the book, he has been constructing hierarchies of activities and specialisms. Bridle-making, because it is merely instrumental to horsemanship, is less complete than horsemanship. But horsemanship is instrumental to the end of military science, and so subordinate in turn to it. In general, Aristotle says, instrumental goods are inferior to goods which are both good in themselves and instrumental to some other good. The most complete (or most final, or most perfect) good is that which is not instrumental to any other good, and is good in itself. Such is happiness.

The same follows from the notion of 'self-sufficiency'. This notion was popular in philosophical discussions of Aristotle's time. According to Aristotle's use of it here, something is self-sufficient 'which on its

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own makes life worthy of choice and lacking in nothing'. Happiness does this. It is also unimprovable: it cannot be made more 'worthy of choice'. It is important to recognize here that Aristotle is not suggesting that a life can be happy only if it is itself unimprovable. That would be absurd, since any human life is always lacking something the addition of which would improve it. Rather, Aristotle's point is a *conceptual* constraint on any *conception* of happiness, that it not be improvable by the addition of some good which it has omitted. Compare here the argument of Plato's mentioned approvingly by Aristotle in x.2, 1172b: if you claim that happiness consists in pleasure, but accept that a life containing pleasure *and* wisdom is better than a life containing just the pleasure, your conception has been shown to be lacking.

This interpretation of Aristotle on happiness has come to be known as 'inclusivist', for the obvious reason that it understands Aristotle to be claiming that any conception of happiness must include all goods. Against this, the 'dominant' interpretation has been offered, according to which Aristotle sees happiness as the primary or dominant good among several others. The force behind the dominant view lies mainly in the fact that in x.7, 1177a, Aristotle appears to claim that happiness is to be identified with just one good, that of philosophical contemplation. Here, an inclusivist may suggest that Aristotle, having argued in 1.7, 1098a, that happiness consists in the exercise of the virtues, moves on in book x to consider which of these virtues is the most important. At this point, we may wish to ask Aristotle which life one should go for, and whether it might be acceptable to commit vicious acts so as to further one's contemplation (to kill a rich aunt, for example, so as to spend one's inheritance on studying philosophy at Cambridge). Here we should remember Aristotle's frequent recommendation that we not seek greater precision in ethics than the subject-matter permits (see, e.g., 1.3, 1094b), and his reminding us in x.8, 1178a, that happiness can be found in exercising the moral virtues. There is nothing in Aristotle's text to suggest that he would advocate immorality in the pursuit of philosophy.

Having outlined this conceptual constraint, Aristotle then moves to consider the *ergon* – the characteristic activity – of human beings, in the hope that some light may be shed on the nature of human happiness.⁴ What makes a flautist a flautist? His characteristic activity, viz., playing

⁴ Cf. Plato, *Republic* 352d–354a.

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the flute. The good – the ‘acting well’ – of a flautist is, of course, to perform that characteristic activity well. Now consider a human being. His characteristic activity is the exercise of reason: that is what, Aristotle thinks, makes human beings what they are. The good of a human being, then, will be exercising that capacity well. But what is it to do that? The good is acting well, and acting well is acting in accordance with the virtues. So exercising rationality well will consist in exercising rationality in acting virtuously.

This famous argument of Aristotle’s – usually called the ‘function argument’ – has been subjected to much criticism. Do human beings have a single characteristic activity? Is rationality not anyway characteristic of other beings, i.e., the gods? Why assume that the good for a human being is the same as performing well the characteristic activity of human beings? (In other words, perhaps the (morally) good human life is not the life that is in fact best for me, in terms of my own well-being.) Why should exercising rationality well not be to use reason to seek my own pleasure, or honour, or power: is Aristotle not just smuggling his own conception of happiness into the argument?

Some of these objections probably rest on uncharitable interpretations of the argument. And at least some of them can be avoided if we see Aristotle’s conception of happiness as resting not only on the function argument itself, but on his accounts of the individual virtues in books II–V. Of course, it is too swift of him to expect us just to accept that exercising rationality well is exercising it in accordance with the virtues. But the detailed portrait Aristotle paints of the virtuous life – and vicious lives – in the later books can be seen as providing the main support for his account of happiness, just as Plato’s descriptions in the *Republic* of the conditions of the souls of, and the lives of, virtuous and vicious people may also be seen as advertisements for the attractions of virtue.

Book I closes with an important series of discussions concerning happiness and luck. It is of course a philosopher’s dream to be able to provide a recipe for happiness which makes it immune to luck, and it was one of the main motivations of much ancient philosophy to make that dream a reality. Aristotle, however, recognizes that at least three kinds of contingency can affect one’s happiness: the circumstances of one’s birth, events during one’s life, and events after one’s life. Perhaps hardest for a modern to accept is the last. One should remember first

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that ‘happiness’ is not, for Aristotle, a state of mind, but rather whatever it is that constitutes the good for a human being. Secondly, he stresses that *post mortem* luck cannot swing the balance, depriving of happiness, for example, a life that would otherwise have been happy. Finally, it is worth noting that, in reflecting upon how well the life of someone now dead went, we do often consider, for instance, whether projects to which they devoted time have come to fruition.

Virtue and the mean

It is important not to lose sight of the conclusion of the *ergon* argument: human happiness consists in the exercise of the virtues. This has the radical implication that a vicious or immoral person literally has nothing to live for, and indeed that they might be best advised to commit suicide (since viciousness constitutes unhappiness). What, then, did Aristotle mean by ‘virtue’?

Greek culture was one of excellence, in the sense that young men were encouraged to compete with one another in many spheres of life, including athletic, intellectual, and aesthetic activity. It is worth remembering that in Greek a horse that ran fast could be said to have a ‘virtue’ or excellence, in so far as it performed well its characteristic activity. Aristotle, however, is speaking not so much of physical excellences as virtues of character and of thought. Here, it is important that we have some understanding of the soul (I.13, 1102a–1103a).

The soul can be seen as bipartite, with a rational and a non-rational part. The rational part is the source of the intellectual virtues, the most important of which in connection with ethics is practical wisdom. We may subdivide the non-rational part, one of its sub-parts being concerned merely with nutrition and so on. The other part has more in common with reason, and is capable both of opposing it (in the case of a weak-willed person, for instance) and of obeying it. The virtues of this second sub-part are the virtues of character: courage, generosity, and so on.

Intellectual virtue is acquired primarily through teaching, while the virtues of character arise through habit. Someone might possess outstanding mathematical ability from a very young age, but developing virtue of character is more like learning a skill, such as carpentry. Performing just actions, generous actions, and so on, will lead one to develop the corresponding character. Here, someone might ask: ‘Surely,

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someone who is performing just actions is *already* just?' Aristotle resolves this puzzle by pointing out that if an agent is virtuous he will perform virtuous actions in the correct way: knowing what he is doing, choosing them for their own sake, and doing them from a well-grounded disposition (II.4, 1105a).

The second condition provides a link between Aristotle's view and that of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). According to Kant, in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, moral worth attaches to an action only to the extent that it is motivated by respect for the moral law. Some have taken exception to this claim, suggesting not only that moral worth can lie in other motivations, such as love, but that pure respect for duty is itself sometimes out of place. Aristotle here tells us that a virtuous person will choose virtuous actions for their own sake. Elsewhere, he says that he will choose them for the sake of 'the noble', and we can plausibly see choosing an action for its own sake as equivalent to choosing it for the sake of the noble. Again, as with Kant, there is no reference to love of others. But we should not forget Aristotle's account of friendship, which does allow for the concern one person may have for another (see below).

Virtues, then, are dispositions engendered in us through practice or habituation. The notions of excess and deficiency, which play such an important part in Aristotle's account of the virtues, are first introduced in connection with the notion of habituation (II.2, 1104a). In the case of healthy eating, for example, getting into the habit of eating too much or of eating too little will ruin one's health. Aristotle compares someone who is afraid of everything to someone who is afraid of nothing, and this kind of comparison has led some commentators to think he is offering us a quantitative account, according to which virtue is to be captured in, for example, being afraid of a middling number of things. But Aristotle's thinking is clearly prescriptive or normative: the brave person is the one who stands firm against terrifying situations, when he should, for the right reasons, and so on.

We should bear this in mind also when seeking to understand the notion that, in the case of virtue, the relevant mean is relative to us. Some have been tempted to think that Aristotle is here allowing the character we already have to influence what virtue requires of us. If I am a highly irascible person, for instance, the mean relative to me, when you are slightly late for an unimportant meeting with me, might be

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merely to hurl a book in your direction, an action in between glowering at you and physically assaulting you, both of which I have been known to do in similar situations. But this cannot be the correct interpretation of Aristotle, since the right action in any situation is that which the virtuous person would do. What Aristotle means is that what is morally required is what the virtuous person would do in our circumstances – if he, for example, was as rich as we were, since what is generous in any case depends on the resources one possesses (IV.1, 1120b).

What, then, is the ‘doctrine of the mean’? In II.6, 1106b, Aristotle says that we can feel fear, for example, either too much or too little, but that having fear at the right time, of the right things, and so on is ‘the mean and best’. But how are we to understand feeling fear at the right time as in a mean? Again we have to remember the normative nature of the doctrine. No one should be fearless, since there are some things one should fear. Likewise, there are things one should not fear. There are, then, two directions in which we may go wrong: feeling fear at the right time is in between not feeling fear at the right time, and feeling fear at the wrong time.

This analysis helps us to see how the doctrine of the mean works with actions. Generosity, for example, involves giving away money at the right time, and to the right people, and one may fail to live up to its requirements both by failing to give away money when one should (which is stinginess) and giving away money when one should not (which is wastefulness). We can also see how one’s character may consist partly in two ‘opposite’ vices, and Aristotle explicitly says (IV.1, 1121a–b) that some of the characteristics of wastefulness (such as spending money when one should not) are commonly found with certain characteristics of stinginess (such as taking money from the wrong sources). Aristotle’s doctrine is therefore not one of moderation. Sometimes, for example, one will be required to be very angry, and sometimes to give away only a tiny amount of money. It depends on the circumstances, and moderation has nothing in itself to be said for it.

The doctrine of the mean works when we have a single morally neutral action or feeling that it is possible to do or feel at the right time, fail to do or feel at the right time, and do or feel at the wrong time. It is not surprising, therefore, that Aristotle runs into trouble with courage by including both feeling fear and assessing probabilities within its remit. Likewise, appropriate indignation cannot be a mean between

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both envy and spite, since these two vices concern different things, viz., pain at others' doing well and pleasure at their doing badly. And there are certainly problems with justice, which we shall consider below. But the doctrine rests on an important insight: there are spheres of human action and feeling, and virtue consists in success within these spheres.

It has been claimed by some that the doctrine is empty, and Aristotle himself appears to move in the direction of saying this in VI.1, 1138b: my telling you to perform the mean action is like my telling you, when you are ill, to take the medicines the doctor would prescribe. But Aristotle does use the doctrine to offer advice in II.9, 1109a–b: you should, for instance, take care to avoid the extreme to which you are most tempted (if you are a bit stingy, do what seems to you somewhat extravagant, and you will end up closer to getting it right). Taken on its own, the doctrine would be pretty useless. But combined with 'first principles' (I.7, 1098b), i.e., basic ethical beliefs, it can help one to assess one's own character and direct its formation.

In recent years, there has been a revival of interest in the virtues, and in the ethics of virtue. This revival began with an article of G. E. M. Anscombe's, in which she recommended dropping the modern language of 'obligation', with its connotations of a divine lawgiver whose existence is no longer widely accepted, and seeking an understanding of human psychology as a possible grounding of an ethics of virtue.⁵

The two main modern competitors to virtue ethics are utilitarianism and Kantianism. It is important to recognize that these three theories may largely converge in their practical conclusions. They may all, for instance, recommend that one be generous, or just. But the reasons that the theories offer differ greatly. According to utilitarianism, what makes actions right is their producing the largest amount of well-being overall. According to Kantianism, what makes actions right is their being in accordance with the law of reason. We might understand Aristotle, and a pure virtue ethics, as claiming that what makes actions right is their being virtuous.

There are differences between Aristotle and modern writers on the virtues. The virtue of kindness or beneficence, for example, is almost entirely absent from Aristotle's account, though he does allow that human beings do feel some common bonds with one another on the

⁵ G. E. M. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy* 33 (1958); repr. in R. Crisp and M. Slote (eds.), *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

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basis of their shared humanity (VIII.1, 1155a). And the crown of the virtues for Aristotle is a distinctly unmodern and pre-Christian disposition, greatness of soul (IV.3), which consists in thinking oneself worthy of great things and being concerned almost entirely with honour. The great-souled person is unlikely to stir himself to help the vulnerable.

Aristotle's discussions may be tabulated as follows:

<i>Virtue</i>	<i>Sphere</i>	<i>Discussion in NE</i>
Courage	Fear and confidence	III.6–9
Temperance	Bodily pleasure and pain	III.10–12
Generosity	Giving and retaining money	IV.1
Magnificence	Giving and retaining money on a large scale	IV.2
Greatness of soul	Honour on a large scale	IV.3
[Nameless]	Honour on a small scale	IV.4
Even temper	Anger	IV.5
Friendliness	Social relations	IV.6
Truthfulness	Honesty about oneself	IV.7
Wit	Conversation	IV.8
Justice	Distribution	V
Friendship	Personal relations	VIII–IX

Aristotle also briefly discusses shame, which he says is not really a virtue, and appropriate indignation.

Another difference between Aristotle and modern theorists of the virtues is his objective notion of happiness. The idea that there is some universal account of well-being, especially one grounded in human nature, is denied by most important modern writers who otherwise see themselves as returning to Aristotle. Likewise, none of them goes as far as to identify happiness with the exercise of the virtues.

It is also important to remember the context in which Aristotle composed his lectures. He was writing two and a half millennia ago, for noblemen in a city-state of tens of thousands. He believed such a city to be the best form of human society, and might well have thought it absurd even to attempt carrying across his conclusions about happiness in such a polity to what he would have seen as highly degenerate nation-states. It is not, in other words, a good idea to claim Aristotle as an ally in a modern debate the very assumptions of which he might have

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questioned. Rather, he should be read, carefully and sensitively, with an understanding of historical, social, and political context, as one of the best sources of insight into the human ethical condition available to us.

Voluntariness and responsibility

Though the *Ethics* forms separate books, the themes of the books are closely connected. We have already seen that Aristotle identifies happiness with virtuous activity. He recognizes next that virtuous actions are praised, and vicious actions blamed, only when they are voluntary. So the discussion of voluntariness in III.1–5 should not be seen as a general disquisition on free will. We should also remember Aristotle's audience, many of whom might have hoped for careers in legislation. For them, Aristotle thought, it was important to understand what is, and what is not, to be rewarded and punished.

Aristotle begins by identifying two excusing conditions, ignorance and force, which have remained central in philosophical and legal accounts of responsibility (III.1, 1110a–b). Here he was himself influenced by the Athenian legal system already in operation. In a case of force, the 'first principle' or source of the action is external to the agent. Thus, I might say that I am going to Egypt, even when being carried there against my will by the wind. An obvious question here is whether this account of force is too narrow, and whether there may not be cases of inner compulsion. It is partly reflecting upon this question that leads Aristotle into a discussion of what he calls 'mixed actions'. An example is a captain's throwing cargo overboard to stop his ship going down: he might well claim, in mitigation, that he had no choice. Aristotle here sticks to his guns. The source of the action is internal, and so it is voluntary. But he does allow that in a sense such actions are, understood 'without qualification', involuntary: they are the sorts of thing no one would choose voluntarily in themselves. This is really a new sense of involuntariness, but no confusion need arise if we take Aristotle to be saying merely that throwing cargo overboard is not the sort of thing that someone chooses in itself. He does, however, go on to soften the force criterion a little: there are some things that are too much for a human being, such as severe torture, where pardon rather than blame is called for.

Besides voluntariness and involuntariness, Aristotle suggests a third

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category: the non-voluntary. Imagine that I finish with the brush I am using to paint an upstairs window frame, and drop it to the ground below. Unbeknownst to me, my neighbour is passing at the time, and the brush lands squarely on her head. Here, we might have expected my ignorance to cause my action to be involuntary, but Aristotle claims that, if I do not regret my action, then it is non-voluntary, not involuntary. This distinction may perhaps arise out of Aristotle's concern with praise and blame, for if I am not sorry for what I did, there may be said to be a case for blaming me (even if it is true that I would not have done what I did had I known of my neighbour's presence).

Further reflection on ignorance and responsibility leads Aristotle to further refinement. There is a distinction between acting in ignorance and acting through ignorance. A drunk acts merely in ignorance, and he is responsible not only for getting himself into that state but for what he does while in it. Further, it is only ignorance of particular circumstances and not of moral principles themselves which can excuse.

Aristotle's central interest in virtue also drives his argument in later chapters of book III. Rational choice and deliberation are discussed in III.2–3 because the virtuous person is the one who deliberates and rationally chooses correctly. As often, Aristotle begins by telling us what the object of his inquiry is not: rational choice is not appetite, spirit, wish, or belief. It involves deliberation, the sphere of which is what is 'up to us', and we rationally choose to do what we have judged to be right as the result of deliberation. So rational choice is deliberative desire, and is the point at which the thought of the virtuous person emerges in the world in his actions.

In III.5, an important chapter, Aristotle begins by repeating that virtuous and vicious actions are up to us, and suggesting that therefore the Socratic view that no one is willingly bad must be rejected. Aristotle imagines someone's objecting that a vicious person's character *makes him* act wrongly, so that he cannot be held responsible. Aristotle responds that such a person is himself responsible for having that character. If someone is unjust, he has become unjust through performing unjust actions, which at the time he must have known would lead to his developing an unjust character. An unjust person is like someone who has become ill by ignoring his or her doctor's advice.

Aristotle courageously continues to face up to the objector, who he

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now imagines claiming that the end we aim at in our actions is natural, and so never something for which any vicious person could be held responsible at any time. Among Aristotle's responses is the suggestion that what a person pursues in their actions is at least partly up to them. This response strikes many people as plausible. Although Aristotle does not explicitly allow for unusual cases, such as brainwashing or fully deterministic genetic propensities, his account makes good sense of the everyday assumptions that underlie our ascriptions of responsibility in the courts and in ordinary life.

He makes no room for moral luck. The virtuous person deserves praise, even if, as it happened, it was easy for him to become virtuous, since, perhaps, he was brought up in a prosperous household, given a solid education, and surrounded by attractive role-models. Likewise, the vicious person is to be blamed even if it would in fact have been quite hard for him to be virtuous. Aristotle's concern is not the modern, Kant-inspired, one of awarding moral responsibility solely in proportion to what the agent is solely and ultimately responsible for (if indeed there is such a thing), but of praising and blaming people for what they voluntarily do.

Justice

The subject of Plato's *Republic* is what in Greek is called *dikaiosunē*. This word is usually translated 'justice', but in a recent translation the word 'morality' is used.⁶ This choice reflects an ambiguity in the Greek, itself implicit in Aristotle's distinction between general and particular justice in the first two chapters of book v.

Aristotle uses the notion of general justice to take an angle, or rather several angles, on virtue as a whole. He first distinguishes virtue as exercised in relation to oneself – temperance, for example – from virtue exercised in relation to others. The person with general justice has both. He also exercises both, and so general justice will be a quality found only within a community in which the virtuous person can find people to serve as objects of his virtuous actions. It is complete.

Aristotle ties this conception of complete virtue to the law, his thought being that the law (ideally speaking) aims ultimately at the

⁶ Plato, *Republic*, trans. R. Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

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instantiation of all the virtues in the citizens it governs. So what is generally just is what is lawful. Because Aristotle is thinking of the law in an ideal sense (though it has to be admitted that he does not say this explicitly), he cannot be accused plausibly of holding that whatever the law prescribes within any jurisdiction is what is virtuous there. Aristotle is, as we have seen, an ethical objectivist, and he was perfectly aware of the possibility of bad laws. Nevertheless, he does extend the boundaries of legal concern too widely. The law cannot plausibly be said to be aiming at inculcating virtues such as generosity or wit in its citizens, other than highly indirectly. Here, however, we must face up to the possibility that Aristotle may have thought that the law should concern itself with such issues, a possibility that seems not unlikely in the light of his enthusiasm at the end of the *Politics* for detailed legislation concerning the playing of flutes.

Particular justice is another individual virtue, to be set alongside even temper, generosity, courage, and so on, as part of general justice. The doctrine of the mean requires Aristotle to find a special feeling or action to characterize it, and he chooses greed (v.2, 1130a). His line of thought is clear enough: the unjust person will give himself more than his fair share, which is what the greedy person does. But what is the feeling of which greed is the excess? The right concern for one's own rights or property? But then what is the deficiency? An unwillingness to exert one's rights is not any kind of injustice. Aristotle's problem is that there seems to be no central feeling or action in the case of justice. It is a quality applied primarily to outcomes or states of affairs, and actions and characters are then characterized as just or unjust on the basis of whether they bring about, or demonstrate a proper concern for, such outcomes. Aristotle sees this: his influential discussion of justice in book v is largely a discussion of such outcomes and states of affairs, and not 'the just person'. It is only when Aristotle seeks to force justice into the mould of the doctrine of the mean that he goes wrong.

He has another attempt in his discussion of distributive justice (v.3, 1131a), stretching the doctrine of the mean by bringing in the notion of what is equal as the mean. Again, this is not what we have in the case of the other virtues: a characteristic feeling or action. In v.7, 1134b, he focuses on the distinction between 'too much' and 'too little', noting that 'having too much' may constitute doing injustice, and 'having too little' may constitute suffering it. Justice is then said to be a mean

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between doing injustice and suffering it. But as Aristotle himself admits, suffering injustice cannot be said to be a vice, and indeed many just people exemplify their justice in their being treated unjustly by others.

Aristotle should, then, have been readier to accept that the doctrine of the mean had its limits. But his discussion of justice itself has been highly influential. Consider, for example, his analysis of distributive justice in v.3, which classifies theories of distributive justice according to the criterion that they advocate as the basis of distributions (according to a democratic theory, for example, all citizens fall within the scope of justice). Another chapter, v.5, contains Aristotle's seminal account of money, as designed to achieve proportionate reciprocity in exchange. Consider also his distinction between natural and legal justice (v.7, 1134b). In this chapter, Aristotle claims that there is, as regards certain aspects of any society, a 'naturally best' way for them to be, while other aspects may be grounded only in the traditions and customs of that particular society. Here we see the root of the natural law tradition, according to which certain claims about right and wrong can be based upon a general account of human good and evil, arrived at by rational reflection. This tradition was continued by Aquinas, and today can be found in the writings of John Finnis and others.⁷

Aristotle's discussion of 'equity' in v.10 begins to move us in the direction of discussing practical wisdom, the key intellectual virtue in ethics. Equity is the virtue of a judge which allows him to 'fill in the gaps' left by the law. Human life is of such unpredictability and complexity that any law, however skilfully drafted, will leave room for 'hard cases', which call for legal discretion. A classic case is the skateboarder in the park, on the railings of which hangs a sign forbidding the use of vehicles in the park. Is a skateboard a vehicle? A judge may have to decide, and he will make his decision by careful attention to the salient features of the situation in question, including the law and the intentions of those who originally framed it. This quasi-perceptual, non-rule-governed capacity has much in common with practical wisdom, as we shall now see.

⁷ See, e.g., J. Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

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Practical wisdom

Having read Aristotle's detailed discussions of the various individual virtues of character in books II–V, one might be forgiven for thinking that he had completed his account of the nature of virtuous action. But there remains an important gap, to be filled by practical wisdom. Virtue, as we have seen, is a matter of getting it right within particular spheres of human life. Virtue of character rests partly on the development of dispositions towards virtuous action through habituation. This habituation will be guided by, for example, one's parents or teachers. But the virtuous person is able to get it right in each sphere without guidance from others, and his capacity to do that is what centrally constitutes practical wisdom.

The mean is what one should be aiming at because it is 'determined by the reason by reference to which the practically wise person would determine it' (II.6, 1107a). Some have read book VI in the hope that Aristotle would provide us with an explicit rule or principle that we might apply to determine the mean in particular situations. Their hope has been disappointed, since no such rule is forthcoming. Nor should we expect one. Aristotle frequently says that ethics is not capturable in a set of explicit principles (e.g., I.3, 1094b), and VI.8, 1142a, makes it clear that practical wisdom is less a capacity to apply rules than an ability to see situations correctly. This perception is rational; hence Aristotle's use of the word 'reason' in his account of the determination of the mean.

As we have seen, virtues of character correspond to one particular part of the soul – that part which is not strictly rational, but is obedient to reason. In book VI, Aristotle divides the rational part of the soul into two, and postulates two classes of intellectual virtue corresponding, respectively, to each part. He does this because he believes both that objects of reasoning can themselves be divided into two – the invariable (e.g., mathematics) and the variable (e.g., human action) – and that parts of the soul have kinship with their objects. Book VI concerns primarily the practical side of reason, but the last sentence of VI.1 makes it clear that he is also interested in the scientific part of the soul that corresponds to the invariable. This makes sense, as happiness consists in the exercise of any virtue of the soul, and this part of the soul has its own virtues, as becomes clear in X.7.

Aristotle claims that there are five states of the soul that grasp the

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truth ‘by affirmation or denial’ (VI.3, 1139b). One is practical wisdom, while the others are:

- (i) science, or scientific knowledge: grasps what is necessary and eternal, such as mathematics;
- (ii) skill: concerned with the variable, and with production rather than action (i.e., with instrumental activities rather than ends-in-themselves);
- (iii) intellect: concerned with non-demonstrable first principles, it grasps the minor premise in practical syllogisms (see below), so is related to practical wisdom;
- (iv) wisdom: not really a separate virtue, since it consists in (i) and (iii) when they concern what is ‘most honourable’, i.e., philosophy.

We know from III.2–3 that being virtuous involves deliberating well, and Aristotle expands upon this in VI.5. Here we find that the person of practical wisdom can deliberate about what advances living well, that is, about what is virtuous. Good deliberation, like virtue in itself, involves getting it right (VI.9, 1142b), that is, achieving something good by using the right steps in one’s reasoning. Deliberation, then, is itself a part of being practically wise.

Again, we see Aristotle’s objectivism emerging. Practical wisdom is a grasp of ‘practical truth’, independent of what we think (VI.2, 1139a). But, as we have seen, it is not something to be learned or articulated in explicit principles. Human action is variable and complex, and so practical wisdom concerns matters that are inexact. Its acquisition requires experience, and consists in one’s becoming able to see what matters in certain circumstances, and why. It is closely related to common sense, except that its sphere is that of the virtues as a whole. It is important also to remember that it consists not merely in the ability to see or to understand, but in a capacity to give orders (VI.10, 1143a). Unlike judgement, practical wisdom involves the virtuous person’s commanding himself to perform what is called for in the circumstances.

So we can already see how both practical wisdom and the habituated dispositions of the virtues of character work together. Towards the end of book VI, Aristotle returns to this question, and claims that virtue makes the aim right, and practical wisdom the ‘things towards it’ (VI.12, 1144a). One might understand this to mean that virtue is primary in the

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virtuous person's acting, the role of practical wisdom being merely to work out the means to ends set independently of it. Even if it is a capacity to see what constitutes various ends, the setting of those ends in itself may seem not to concern it. But a better way to understand the relation here is as follows. Practical wisdom requires virtue of character, in the sense that it cannot develop or operate unless one has been brought up in the correct habits. Practical wisdom is in fact what 'gets the goal right' in action, while virtue is what enables one to get it right (i.e., it 'makes the goal right'). Imagine that you see someone in need of money. As a virtuous person, you might think as follows: 'Since the highest good is virtuous activity [and you would not be thinking this unless you had been brought up properly to the point that you developed the practical wisdom to think it with], and since this is a case where generosity is called for, and since generosity here will call for giving roughly two *minae*, then I had better deliberate about how best to get hold of the money . . .'.

In VI.13, 1144b–1145a, we also find that practical wisdom comes only in a package along with all the virtues of character. One cannot be, say, courageous but stingy, or even-tempered but unjust. The reason for this is that practical wisdom is the capacity to succeed in action through giving oneself the correct orders. If you have a vice, this will damage your capacity to see situations correctly, and you will not be 'good without qualification' (Aristotle is of course aware that many will fall short of this ideal to a greater or lesser degree).

We should remember that, despite the perceptual nature of practical wisdom, moral rules can play a part in ethics. Such rules will of course be inexact, such as, 'You should return favours rather than do favours for your companions; but if your father needs ransoming from pirates, you should not pay back the person who ransomed you' (see IX.2, 1164b–1165a). This is inexact, because it would not decide, for example, the following case: one group of pirates has your villainous father on their ship, while another group has your mother and virtuous twin brother; you have enough only to satisfy one group. Moral rules always run out, as we saw happen with legal rules in our discussion of equity. And here judgement 'lies in perception' (II.9, 1109b).

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Incontinence

From the beginning of the *Ethics*, we see that Aristotle understands human lives in terms of nested goals. Each of us aims at our own happiness, and we each have our own conception of what that is. If I think that happiness consists in honour, then I shall pursue happiness by pursuing honour. And if I think honour is best achieved in politics, I shall pursue honour by seeking a political career. And so on.

But one apparently common human phenomenon seems to throw doubt on Aristotle's position: incontinence, or weakness. Incontinent people seem to have a particular conception of what their own happiness will consist in, but, when being incontinent, they seem not to pursue it at all. An example. Larry is overweight, and strongly wishes to lose weight so that he can return to his favourite activity, waterskiing. But Larry also likes chocolate, and can rarely resist eating a piece when he gets the chance. He says that he knows he really should not be eating the chocolate, but goes ahead and does it anyway.

Aristotle is particularly concerned with the question of what kind of knowledge the incontinent person has. This is partly because of the role of that issue in the Socratic philosophical tradition he was continuing. As Aristotle points out, Socrates had denied that incontinence was possible, and explained apparent incontinence as mere ignorance of what is best. Socrates denied that knowledge could be overcome by desire, and Aristotle notes that this is inconsistent with what people ordinarily think. Aristotle has also his own reason to be concerned about the power of knowledge. He has stressed the practicality of ethics, but if people can know what the right thing to do is, but fail to do it, it will be harder to make ethics practical.

So what is Aristotle's explanation of incontinence? He offers it in an important chapter: VII.3. He notes first that one can distinguish between two ways of knowing something. Imagine that I know that eating corned beef is dangerous, and you catch me eating a corned beef sandwich. I may just have failed to make use of my knowledge, and stop eating the sandwich once you remind me. So we can know without using our knowledge, and, as Aristotle says, there is nothing particularly strange about that. What would be strange would be my eating the sandwich while attending to, or 'using', the knowledge.

In the non-puzzling case, you can actualize my dispositional knowl-

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edge about corned beef merely by pointing out to me what I am eating. But there is a second way in which knowledge can be dispositional, viz., if I am asleep, mad, or drunk. Merely telling me what I eating if I am in one of these states will be insufficient to actualize my knowledge. Rather, you will have first to wake me, make me sane, or sober me up. This kind of dispositional knowledge is what incontinent people have, Aristotle suggests, and this gives him an answer to a question Socrates failed to address: if an incontinent person is ignorant of what is best, how is it that he often says, at the very time he is being incontinent, that he knows? Aristotle sees the words of the incontinent as like the words of a drunk: in a sense, they do not know what they are saying.

Aristotle expands his explanation using his notion of the practical syllogism. The practical syllogism is Aristotle's attempt to provide a framework for explaining, fully and without remainder, all human action. In a theoretical syllogism, the conclusion follows of necessity:

All men are mortal.
 Socrates is a man.
 Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

Aristotle wishes to explain how an action follows with a similar degree of necessity when two practical premises come together. For example:

Sweet things are to be tasted.
 This is a sweet thing.
 Therefore, this must be tasted. [Sometimes, the conclusion is itself understood as the action of tasting.]

In an ordinary case of eating something sweet, the above syllogism might be all that is required to explain what is going on. But in the case of incontinence, there is another syllogism which deters the agent from tasting. What is this syllogism? Some commentators have thought that its first, or major, premise is:

Sweet things are not to be tasted.

But this is impossible, since we know that we have the minor premise:

This is a sweet thing.

With these two premises in place, a non-tasting must follow by necessity, and of course it does not in the case of incontinence. Rather, the major premise here must be something like:

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Fattening things should not be tasted.

To return to the case of Larry, what then happens is that his desire interferes with his practical reasoning and loosens his grip on the relevant minor premise:

This is a fattening thing.

He may well say that he knows that this chocolate is fattening (and of course that he should not eat it), but desire, like alcohol, has led him to speak without fully understanding the import of what he says.

It is in this way that Aristotle seeks to retain both the Socratic view that knowledge cannot be overridden, alongside the view of common sense that it can. For Larry's understanding that fattening things should not be eaten is left untouched, while his awareness of the salient feature of the particular case at hand is dimmed by desire.

Aristotle's account has struck many as unacceptable, in that the knowledge we have when incontinent often appears to be, in itself, unaffected by our desire. Its only defect is its failure to issue in the appropriate action. But we should take care to distinguish between mere propositional knowledge, and the kind of evaluative or practical understanding Aristotle appears to have in mind here. This kind of understanding, if you have it, will issue in action, and lack of action is a clear sign of lack of knowledge. But here it may begin to seem as if Aristotle wins only by changing the terms of the debate, since many will continue to think that the knowledge of the incontinent is the same as that of the continent and of the virtuous. It is merely that the incontinent's knowledge does not issue in action.

Friendship

Some have thought that Aristotle's discussion of friendship in books VIII and IX, which do indeed appear to have been composed as a separate entity, was mistakenly tacked on to the *Ethics* by a later editor. But there seems no reason to think that Aristotle himself did not include it in his own composition of the *Ethics*, since it fits perfectly well into his overall project.

Aristotle's conception of friendship is broad. It includes parents' relation to their children (including animals' relations to their offspring), the natural kinship felt by one human being with another, and

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the amicable relations of business partners. In VIII.2, 1155b, Aristotle tells us that friendship involves goodwill – the wishing of goods for the sake of the other – which is reciprocated, and of which each party is aware. We then find that goodwill is really found only in friendships between virtuous people (VIII.3, 1156a). In the case of friendships for utility and for pleasure, Aristotle suggests, the people seem to have goodwill towards themselves, rather than one another (IX.5, 1167a). It is worth noting that, if the virtue mentioned in IV.6, 1126b, is roughly the same as that discussed in books VIII–IX, then Aristotelian friendship does involve people’s actually liking one another.

Is friendship a virtue? The first sentence of VIII.1 might be taken to suggest that Aristotle is not sure: ‘it is a virtue or involves virtue’. Aristotle would not have hesitated over such an important matter, however, and we must take the sentence to mean that friendship both is a virtue, and involves the exercise of virtues. Given that it is a virtue, what is its relation to happiness? As a virtue, it will involve feeling goodwill to the right people, in the right way, and so on, and exercising this virtue will be a constituent of happiness. But friendship is also an ‘instrumental good’ (see I.8, 1099a–b), since friends may serve, for example, as beneficiaries of one’s virtuous action. Further, virtuous activity itself involves the pleasure of contemplating one’s own virtuous actions. The virtuous actions of a virtuous friend are, in a sense, one’s own, so one can enjoy contemplating them (IX.9, 1169b). Relatedly, just as the virtuous person’s own being or life is worth choosing, so is that of the friend, for the friend is ‘another self’ (IX.9, 1170b).

We saw how at the beginning of book VI Aristotle appeared to doubt his own doctrine of the mean. It might seem as if, at the beginning of book VIII, he is hesitating about the stress he has placed on justice earlier in the work. He says that friendship is, in a sense, more important than justice: legislators aim at concord, and if people are friends, they do not need justice. Aristotle’s point here is that justice provides external arbitration on matters which are potentially disputable. If people are friends, such disputes will not arise, since friends wish good to one another. But we should not take Aristotle to be rejecting justice entirely, since there are bound in any city to be some areas of social life which require the governance of justice. Indeed, in VIII.9, 1159b, Aristotle seems to suggest that the boundaries of friendship are also the boundaries of justice. So parents, for example, who are friends to their