

## 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.'<sup>1</sup> 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'.<sup>2</sup> 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,

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

<sup>2</sup> 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'.<sup>3</sup> 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

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

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person, 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 own

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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.<sup>4</sup> What makes a flautist a flautist? His characteristic activity, viz., playing

<sup>4</sup> 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 that ‘happiness’ is

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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 merely to

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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.I, 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.I, 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 both envy