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Excerpt  
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## Nicomachean Ethics

## Book I

### Chapter 1

Every skill and every inquiry, and similarly every action and rational choice, 1094a  
 is thought to aim at some good; and so the good has been aptly described as  
 that at which everything aims. But it is clear that there is some difference  
 between ends: some ends are activities, while others are products which are  
 additional to the activities. In cases where there are ends additional to the  
 actions, the products are by their nature better than the activities. 5

Since there are many actions, skills, and sciences, it happens that  
 there are many ends as well: the end of medicine is health, that of  
 shipbuilding, a ship, that of military science, victory, and that of domes-  
 tic economy, wealth. But when any of these actions, skills, or sciences 10  
 comes under some single faculty – as bridlemaking and other sciences  
 concerned with equine equipment come under the science of horsemanship,  
 and horsemanship itself and every action in warfare come under  
 military science, and others similarly come under others – then in all  
 these cases the end of the master science is more worthy of choice than 15  
 the ends of the subordinate sciences, since these latter ends are pursued  
 also for the sake of the former. And it makes no difference whether the  
 ends of the actions are the activities themselves, or something else  
 additional to them, as in the sciences just mentioned.

### Chapter 2

So if what is done has some end that we want for its own sake, and  
 everything else we want is for the sake of this end; and if we do not choose 20

*Nicomachean Ethics*

everything for the sake of something else (because this would lead to an infinite progression, making our desire fruitless and vain), then clearly this will be the good, indeed the chief good. Surely, then, knowledge of the good must be very important for our lives? And if, like archers,  
 25 we have a target, are we not more likely to hit the right mark? If so, we must try at least roughly to comprehend what it is and which science or faculty is concerned with it.

Knowledge of the good would seem to be the concern of the most authoritative science, the highest master science. And this is obviously the science of politics, because it lays down which of the sciences there  
 1094b should be in cities, and which each class of person should learn and up to what level. And we see that even the most honourable of faculties, such as military science, domestic economy, and rhetoric, come under it. Since political science employs the other sciences, and also lays down  
 5 laws about what we should do and refrain from, its end will include the ends of the others, and will therefore be the human good. For even if the good is the same for an individual as for a city, that of the city is obviously a greater and more complete thing to obtain and preserve.  
 10 For while the good of an individual is a desirable thing, what is good for a people or for cities is a nobler and more godlike thing. Our enquiry, then, is a kind of political science, since these are the ends it is aiming at.

Chapter 3

Our account will be adequate if its clarity is in line with the subject-matter, because the same degree of precision is not to be sought in all discussions, any more than in works of craftsmanship. The spheres of  
 15 what is noble and what is just, which political science examines, admit of a good deal of diversity and variation, so that they seem to exist only by convention and not by nature. Goods vary in this way as well, since it happens that, for many, good things have harmful consequences: some people have been ruined by wealth, and others by courage. So we should  
 20 be content, since we are discussing things like these in such a way, to demonstrate the truth sketchily and in outline, and, because we are making generalizations on the basis of generalizations, to draw conclusions along the same lines. Indeed, the details of our claims, then, should be looked at in the same way, since it is a mark of an educated  
 25 person to look in each area for only that degree of accuracy that the

*Book I*

nature of the subject permits. Accepting persuasive arguments from a mathematician is like demanding demonstrations from a rhetorician.

Each person judges well what he knows, and is a good judge of this. So, in any subject, the person educated in it is a good judge of that subject, and the person educated in all subjects is a good judge without qualification. This is why a young person is not fitted to hear lectures on political science, since our discussions begin from and concern the actions of life, and of these he has no experience. Again, because of his tendency to follow his feelings, his studies will be useless and to no purpose, since the end of the study is not knowledge but action. It makes no difference whether he is young in years or juvenile in character, since the deficiency is not related to age, but occurs because of his living and engaging in each of his pursuits according to his feelings. For knowledge is a waste of time for people like this, just as it is for those without self-restraint. But knowledge of the matters that concern political science will prove very beneficial to those who follow reason both in shaping their desires and in acting.

Let these comments – about the student, how our statements are to be taken, and the task we have set ourselves – serve as our preamble.

Chapter 4

Let us continue with the argument, and, since all knowledge and rational choice seek some good, let us say what we claim to be the aim of political science – that is, of all the good things to be done, what is the highest. Most people, I should think, agree about what it is called, since both the masses and sophisticated people call it happiness, understanding being happy as equivalent to living well and acting well. They disagree about substantive conceptions of happiness, the masses giving an account which differs from that of the philosophers. For the masses think it is something straightforward and obvious, like pleasure, wealth, or honour, some thinking it to be one thing, others another. Often the same person can give different accounts: when he is ill, it is health; when he is poor, it is wealth. And when people are aware of their ignorance, they marvel at those who say it is some grand thing quite beyond them. Certain thinkers used to believe that beyond these many good things there is something else good in itself, which makes all these good things good. Examining all the views offered would presumably

*Nicomachean Ethics*

be rather a waste of time, and it is enough to look at the most prevalent  
 30 ones or those that seem to have something to be said for them.

Let us not forget, however, that there is a difference between  
 arguments from first principles and arguments to first principles. For  
 Plato rightly used to wonder about this, raising the question whether  
 the way to go is from first principles or to first principles, as in the  
 1095b racecourse whether it is from the judges to the post or back again as  
 well. For while we should begin from things known, they are known in  
 two senses: known by us, and known without qualification. Presumably  
 we have to begin from things known by us. This is why anyone who is  
 going to be a competent student in the spheres of what is noble and  
 5 what is just – in a word, politics – must be brought up well in his habits.  
 For the first principle is the belief *that* something is the case, and if this  
 is sufficiently clear, he will not need the reason *why* as well. Such a  
 person is in possession of the first principles, or could easily grasp  
 them. Anyone with neither of these possibilities open to him should  
 listen to Hesiod:

10 This person who understands everything for himself is the best of all,  
 And noble is that one who heeds good advice.  
 But he who neither understands it for himself nor takes to heart  
 What he hears from another is a worthless man.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter 5

But let us begin from where we digressed. For people seem, not  
 15 unreasonably, to base their conception of the good – happiness, that is –  
 on their own lives. The masses, the coarsest people, see it as pleasure,  
 and so they like the life of enjoyment. There are three especially promi-  
 nent types of life: that just mentioned, the life of politics, and thirdly the  
 life of contemplation. The masses appear quite slavish by rationally  
 20 choosing a life fit only for cattle; but they are worthy of consideration  
 because many of those in power feel the same as Sardanapallus.<sup>2</sup>

Sophisticated people, men of action, see happiness as honour, since  
 honour is pretty much the end of the political life. Honour, however,  
 seems too shallow to be an object of our inquiry, since honour appears  
 25 to depend more on those who honour than on the person honoured,

<sup>1</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 293, 295–7.    <sup>2</sup> A mythical king of Assyria.

*Book I*

whereas we surmise the good to be something of one's own that cannot easily be taken away. Again, they seem to pursue honour in order to convince themselves of their goodness; at least, they seek to be honoured by people with practical wisdom, among those who are familiar with them, and for their virtue. So it is clear that, to these people at least, virtue is superior.

One might, perhaps, suppose virtue rather than honour to be the end of the political life. But even virtue seems, in itself, to be lacking something, since apparently one can possess virtue even when one is asleep, or inactive throughout one's life, and also when one is suffering terribly or experiencing the greatest misfortunes; and no one would call a person living this kind of life happy, unless he were closely defending a thesis. But enough of this, because these issues have been sufficiently dealt with in our everyday discussions. 30 1096a

The third kind of life is that of contemplation, which we shall examine in what follows. 5

The life of making money is a life people are, as it were, forced into, and wealth is clearly not the good we are seeking, since it is merely useful, for getting something else. One would be better off seeing as ends the things mentioned before, because they are valued for themselves. But they do not appear to be ends either, and many arguments have been offered against them. So let us put them to one side. 10

Chapter 6

It would perhaps be quite a good idea to examine the notion of the universal and go through any problems there are in the way it is employed, despite the fact that such an inquiry turns out to be difficult going because those who introduced the Forms<sup>3</sup> are friends. It will presumably be thought better, indeed one's duty, to do away with even what is close to one's heart in order to preserve the truth, especially when one is a philosopher. For one might love both, but it is nevertheless a sacred duty to prefer the truth to one's friends. 15

Those who introduced this idea did not set up Forms for series in which they spoke of priority and posteriority, and this is why they did not postulate a Form of numbers. But the good is spoken of in the

<sup>3</sup> I.e., Plato and his followers.

*Nicomachean Ethics*

20 categories of substance, of quality and of relation; and that which exists in itself, namely, substance, is naturally prior to what is relative (since this seems like an offshoot and attribute of what is). So there could not be some common Form over and above these goods.

25 Again, good is spoken of in as many senses as is being: it is used in the category of substance, as for instance god and intellect, in that of quality – the virtues, in that of quantity – the right amount, in that of relation – the useful, in that of time – the right moment, and in that of place – the right locality, and so on. So it is clear that there could not be one common universal, because it would be spoken of not in all the categories, but in only one.

30 Again, since there is a single science for the things answering to each individual Form, there should have been some single science for all the goods. But as it happens there are many sciences, even of the things in one category. For example, the right moment: in war, it is military science, in illness, medicine; or the right amount: in diet, it is medicine, in exercise, gymnastics.

35 One might also be puzzled about what on earth they mean by  
 1096b speaking of a ‘thing-in-itself’, since the definition of humanity is one and the same in humanity-in-itself and human being. Inasmuch as they are human, they will not differ. And if this is so, the same will be true of good.

Nor will a thing be any the more good by being eternal, since a long-lasting white thing is no whiter than a short-lived one.

5 The Pythagoreans<sup>4</sup> seem to give a more plausible account of the good, when they place the one in their column of goods; and Speusippus<sup>5</sup> seems to have followed them in this. But let this be the topic of another discussion.

10 An objection to what we have said might be that they did not speak about every good, and that things which are pursued and valued for their own sake are called good by reference to a single Form, while those that tend to be instrumental to these things or in some way to preserve them or prevent their contraries are called good for the sake of these – in a different way, in other words. Clearly, then, things should be called good in two senses: things good in themselves, and things good for the sake of things good in themselves. So let us distinguish things

<sup>4</sup> Followers in Southern Italy of Pythagoras of Samos, who flourished around 530 BCE.

<sup>5</sup> Nephew of Plato, and head of Plato’s Academy from 407–339 BCE.

*Book I*

good in themselves from those that are means to them and see whether  
 the former are called good with reference to a single Form. What sort of  
 things should one put in the class of things good in themselves? Those  
 that are sought even on their own, such as understanding, sight, certain  
 types of pleasure, and honours? For even if we do seek these for the sake  
 of something else, one would nevertheless put them in the class of things  
 good in themselves. Perhaps nothing but the Form? Then the Form  
 would be useless. But if those other things are in the class of things  
 good in themselves, the same definition of the good will have to be  
 exemplified in all of them, as is that of whiteness in snow and white  
 lead. But the definitions of honour, practical wisdom and pleasure are  
 distinct, and differ with respect to their being good. There is therefore  
 no common good answering to a single Form.

But how, then, are things called good? For they do not seem like items  
 that have the same name by chance. Is it through their all deriving from  
 one good, or their all contributing to one good, or is it rather by analogy?  
 For as sight is good in the body, so intellect is in the soul, and so on in  
 other cases. But perhaps we should put these questions aside for the time  
 being, since seeking precision in these matters would be more appropriate  
 to another area of philosophy.

But the same is true of the Form. For even if there is some one good  
 predicated across categories, or a good that is separate, itself in itself,  
 clearly it could not be an object of action nor something attainable by a  
 human being, which is the sort of thing we are looking for.

Perhaps someone might think that it would be better to understand  
 it with an eye to those goods that are attainable and objects of action.  
 For with this as a sort of paradigm we shall know better the goods  
 that are goods for us, and if we know them, we shall attain them. This  
 argument has some plausibility, but seems to be inconsistent with the  
 sciences: they all aim at some good and seek to remedy any lack of the  
 good, but they leave to one side understanding the universal good. And if  
 there were such an important aid available, it is surely not reasonable  
 to think that all practitioners of skills would be ignorant of it and fail  
 even to look for it.

There is also a difficulty in seeing how a weaver or carpenter will  
 be helped in practising his skill by knowing this good-in-itself, or how  
 someone who has contemplated the Form itself will be a better doctor  
 or general. For apparently it is not just health that the doctor attends



*Nicomachean Ethics*

to, but human health, or perhaps rather the health of a particular person, given that he treats each person individually.

That is enough on these issues.

Chapter 7

15 But let us return again to the good we are looking for, to see what it might be, since it appears to vary between different actions and skills: it is one thing in medicine, another in military science, and so on in all other cases. What then is the good in each case? Surely it is that for the sake of which other things are done? In medicine it is health, in military  
 20 science, victory, in housebuilding, a house, and in other cases something else; in every action and rational choice the end is the good, since it is for the sake of the end that everyone does everything else. So if everything that is done has some end, this will be the good among things done, and if there are several ends, these will be the goods.

Our argument, then, has arrived at the same point by a different  
 25 route, but we should try to make it still clearer. Since there appear to be several ends, and some of these, such as wealth, flutes, and implements generally, we choose as means to other ends, it is clear that not all ends are complete. But the chief good manifestly is something complete. So if there is only one end that is complete, this will be what we  
 30 looking for, and if there are several of them, the most complete. We speak of that which is worth pursuing for its own sake as more complete than that which is worth pursuing only for the sake of something else, and that which is never worth choosing for the sake of something else as more complete than things that are worth choosing both in themselves and for the sake of this end. And so that which is always worth choosing in itself and never for the sake of something else we call complete without qualification.

Happiness in particular is believed to be complete without qualification,  
 1097b since we always choose it for itself and never for the sake of anything else. Honour, pleasure, intellect, and every virtue we do indeed choose for themselves (since we would choose each of them even if they had no good effects), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, on the assumption that through them we shall live a life of happiness; whereas  
 5 happiness no one chooses for the sake of any of these nor indeed for the sake of anything else.

*Book I*

The same conclusion seems to follow from considering self-sufficiency, since the complete good is thought to be self-sufficient. We are applying the term 'self-sufficient' not to a person on his own, living a solitary life, but to a person living alongside his parents, children, wife, and friends and fellow-citizens generally, since a human being is by nature a social being. We must, however, set some limit on these, since if we stretch things so far as to include ancestors and descendants and friends of friends we shall end up with an infinite series. But we must think about this later. For now, we take what is self-sufficient to be that which on its own makes life worthy of choice and lacking in nothing. We think happiness to be such, and indeed the thing most of all worth choosing, not counted as just one thing among others. Counted as just one thing among others it would clearly be more worthy of choice with even the least good added to it. For the good added would cause an increase in goodness, and the greater good is always more worthy of choice. Happiness, then, is obviously something complete and self-sufficient, in that it is the end of what is done.

But perhaps saying that happiness is the chief good sounds rather platitudinous, and one might want its nature to be specified still more clearly. It is possible that we might achieve that if we grasp the characteristic activity of a human being. For just as the good – the doing well – of a flute-player, a sculptor or any practitioner of a skill, or generally whatever has some characteristic activity or action, is thought to lie in its characteristic activity, so the same would seem to be true of a human being, if indeed he has a characteristic activity.

Well, do the carpenter and the tanner have characteristic activities and actions, and a human being none? Has nature left him without a characteristic activity to perform? Or, as there seem to be characteristic activities of the eye, the hand, the foot, and generally of each part of the body, should one assume that a human being has some characteristic activity over and above all these? What sort of thing might it be, then? For living is obviously shared even by plants, while what we are looking for is something special to a human being. We should therefore rule out the life of nourishment and growth. Next would be some sort of sentient life, but this again is clearly shared by the horse, the ox, indeed by every animal. What remains is a life, concerned in some way with action, of the element that possesses reason. (Of this element, one part has reason in being obedient to reason, the other in possessing it and engaging