

Aristotle's Ethics

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Preface

This book is primarily designed to be read in conjunction with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* by those who are not already familiar with Aristotle's writings. It requires no knowledge of the Greek language. Some of the difficulties much discussed by professional scholars are here ignored; to others a solution is offered without reference to divergent views. Where Aristotle's text is readily comprehensible he has been left to speak for himself without comment.

The reader new to Aristotle can find his text very difficult and, indeed, intimidating, especially through the veil of a translation. This book attempts to make clear the general lines of Aristotle's thought rather than to examine the text sentence by sentence; it is offered as an aid to those who read Aristotle's own text, not as a substitute for it. There is no way to make Aristotle easy reading, but he is worth the effort.

The author has followed the ancient literary use of 'man' as a noun of common gender and the convention that the pronoun 'he' refers to persons of both sexes in the absence of contrary indications. He has not the literary skill to write otherwise without intolerable clumsiness of diction. In adopting this style he intends no offence to anyone and hopes that none will be taken.

References

All references in this book are to works of Aristotle and are incorporated in the text. General references to discussions by Aristotle are given in the form (Book I, Chapter 1). References to specific passages are of the form (1234a 12). This literally means that the passage referred to occurs on the 12th line of the left hand column of the 1234th page of Bekker's edition of the Greek text. This pagination is noted in the margins of W. D. Ross's translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which is to be found in the *Oxford Works of Aristotle Translated into English*, Vol. IX, in McKeon (ed.) *Introduction to Aristotle*, and in the *World's Classics* series. Most other texts, both in Greek and English, reproduce it. Where such a reference is given not prefaced by a title, it is to the *Nicomachean Ethics*. References to other works are given in the form (*Physics* 123a 12). All translations are by the author unless otherwise attributed.

Introduction

In Homer's *Iliad* Achilles loves his friend Patroclus. The Trojan prince, Hector, kills Patroclus in battle. Achilles, enraged, kills Hector. Having killed Hector, Achilles drags his body daily around the tomb of Patroclus behind his chariot, and leaves it out at night to be mutilated by scavenger dogs. This is truly barbarous behaviour; the gods, who are not unduly squeamish, are horrified and hold a council to decide what to do about it. In the course of their debate Apollo denounces Achilles and adds: 'Let him beware lest we become angry with him, even though he is good.'

The point of this short narrative lies in the last four words: 'though he is good'; we, with our cultural background, might rather have expected: 'since he is very bad'. But Homer sees things differently. Apollo, though an enemy of the Greeks, must acknowledge that Achilles is good, for, after all, he is the son of the goddess Thetis, his father is a king, he is the greatest living warrior, he is rich, he is handsome, he is famous. No Greek of Homer's time, be he god or man, could call such a hero bad. To be bad typically involves being poor, ugly and cowardly, like Thersites in the *Iliad*, and Achilles is not like that. All men ought to be just and obey the laws of the gods, so Achilles could properly be censured, but he could not be called bad.

Homer's ideals and those of the men he wrote for were, of course, long outdated by the time of Plato and Aristotle. But still the good life was that which was to be envied, the most choiceworthy. The rule of the well born and wealthy was still

called aristocracy - the rule of the best. To be good was to be enviable- to be righteous was to be praiseworthy. Unless we understand this we cannot understand Greek ethical thought.

But while goodness and righteousness were traditionally different, the great and the good were still expected to be righteous. The ideal king was just, generous and cared for his people. By Plato's time the existence of any link between goodness and righteousness had come to be questioned. In Plato's dialogues this is illustrated by such men as Polus and Callicles in the *Gorgias* and Thrasymachus in the *Republic*. In the *Republic*, when Socrates asks Thrasymachus: 'So you think that unrighteous men are sensible and good?', Thrasymachus replies: 'Yes, if they are capable of perfect unrighteousness'; the only reason for conforming to morality is fear of the consequences of not doing so. The case is perhaps best put by Glaucon and Adeimantus in Book II of the *Republic*; if you can get the praise given to the righteous by merely seeming to be righteous, what is the point of being restrained by rules of justice and fairness which are a fabrication of the many weak to protect them from the strong? Is not the best life that which affords the maximum satisfaction of one's desires, and has such a life any room for norms of behaviour that restrain that satisfaction?

Now Plato, who regarded such questioners as the main enemy, might in theory have said: 'Never mind about being happy and living the good life; never mind about your personal wellbeing; it is more important to be righteous'. But in fact he never even hints at such a line of argument. He never questions that the rational man will aim at the most worthwhile life, happiness, fulfilment. His strategy is quite different; his aim is to show that being just, being righteous, is an indispensable element in the good life, that Callicles and Thrasymachus are wrong, not for seeking the most rewarding life, but for failing to recognize what it is.

An analogy might be this: suppose that a music lover finds that those around him all agree that they want to listen to the best music; he, too, wants this, but thinks that the music that the others regard as the best is trivial, impermanent and shallow. He does not say: 'Never mind about the best music; seek the sort

of music that I favour'. What he says is: 'Of course we must seek the best music, but you are mistaken about what is the best music which is in fact like this . . .'. So Plato tries to show that traditional moral excellences, such as truthfulness, piety, justice and courage, are ingredients in the best life rather than impediments to or limitations on it.

We need not suppose that Aristotle was convinced by every detail of Plato's arguments in the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*. But he accepts in his ethical writings the conclusion of those dialogues that the wise man who wishes for the best life will accept the requirements of morality. So the modern inquirer who is concerned with the arguments for and against moral scepticism, moral nihilism and moral relativism should turn to Plato rather than to Aristotle. Aristotle, as he himself says (1095b 4-8), takes it for granted that his hearers and readers will be people who have been well brought up, who do not need to be taught how to behave and who do not need to be persuaded to accept the claims of morality. He is concerned to lead us into a systematic consideration of the best way to live one's life that goes beyond what the non-philosopher, however sound in moral judgment, ever attempts. His aim is, as he often says, (for example, at 1103b 26-30), practical, but he attempts to achieve it, not by converting us from wicked ways, but by deepening our understanding. We are to be involved in an intellectual enquiry to determine what is the best sort of life, not in an attempt to convert us to an already known ideal.

If one is to lead the best sort of life, the life most worth living, one will ideally be equipped with all human excellences - excellence of character, certainly, but also excellence of intelligence, of health, of looks and of birth. Such excellences as health, good looks and good birth, though mentioned in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as desirable and elements in the best life (1099b 2-3), are not discussed there in detail; a discussion of good health, for example, would belong more properly to a biological work. But Aristotle considers it necessary to examine in careful detail excellence of character, excellence of the intelligence that is essential in practical affairs as the complement of excellence of character, and other problems of action before he is

Standard interpretations of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics usually maintain that Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.) emphasizes the role of habit in conduct. It is commonly thought that virtues, according to Aristotle, are habits and that the good life is a life of mindless routine. These interpretations of Aristotle's ethics are the result of imprecise translations from the ancient Greek text. Aristotle uses the word *hexis* to denote moral virtue. But the word does not merely mean passive habituation. Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics. One of the most important developments in ethics since the late 20th century has been the renewed interest in centering ethics on teachings about virtue. This development has brought back into the spotlight Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, one of the most influential texts in the history of western philosophical ethics. Aristotle's purpose is to help the reader/hearer to understand and cultivate a mature, well-balanced, many-sided, active, happy life. Nicomachean Ethics. By Aristotle. Commentary: Quite a few comments have been posted about Nicomachean Ethics. Download: A text-only version is available for download. Nicomachean Ethics. By Aristotle.