

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

ARISTOTLE (384–322 B.C.)

Written in the tradition of Aristotle's teacher, Plato—and of Plato's teacher, Socrates—the Nicomachean Ethics addresses the question, “What is the best life for man?” An extended reflection on virtue, happiness, and friendship, it helped to inform the moral and political thought of America's Founders. There are echoes of it, for instance, in President George Washington's First Inaugural Address, when he states “that there exists in the economy and course of nature, an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness.”

C. 350 B.C.

BOOK I

CHAPTER I. Every art and every inquiry, and likewise every action and choice, seems to aim at some good, and hence it has been beautifully said that the good is that at which all things aim. But a certain difference is apparent among ends, since some are ways of being at work, while others are certain kinds of works produced, over and above the being-at-work. And in those cases in which there are ends of any kind beyond the actions, the works produced are by nature better things than the activities. And since there are many actions and arts and kinds of knowledge, the ends also turn out to be many: of medical knowledge the end is health, of shipbuilding skill it is a boat, of strategic art it is victory, of household management it is wealth. But in as many such pursuits as are under some one capacity—in the way that bridle making and all the other skills involved with implements pertaining to horses come under horsemanship, while this and every action pertaining to war come under strategic art, and in the same way other pursuits are under other capacities—in all of them the ends of all the master arts are more worthy of choice than are the ends of the pursuits that come under them, since these latter are pursued for the sake of those arts. And it makes no difference whether

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the ends of the actions are the ways of being at work themselves, or something else beyond these, as they are with the kinds of knowledge mentioned.

CHAPTER 2. If, then, there is some end of the things we do that we want on account of itself, and the rest on account of this one, and we do not choose
5 everything on account of something else (for in that way the choices would go beyond all bounds, so that desire would be empty and pointless), it is clear that this would be the good, and in fact the highest good. Then would not an awareness of it have great weight in one's life, so that, like archers who have a target, we would be more apt to hit on what is needed? But if this is so, one
10 ought to try to get a grasp, at least in outline, of what it is and to what kind of knowledge or capacity it belongs.

And it would seem to belong to the one that is most governing and most a master art, and politics appears to be of this sort, since it prescribes which kinds of knowledge ought to be in the cities, and what sorts each person ought to
15 learn and to what extent; also, we see that the most honored capacities, such as generalship, household economics, and rhetorical skill, are under this one. Since this capacity makes use of the rest of the kinds of knowledge, and also lays down the law about what one ought to do and from what one ought to refrain, the end of this capacity should include the ends of the other pursuits,
20 so that this end would be the human good. For even if the good is the same for one person and for a city, that of the city appears to be greater, at least, and more complete both to achieve and to preserve; for even if it is achieved for only one person that is something to be satisfied with, but for people or for cities it is something more beautiful and more divine. So our pursuit aims at
25 this, and is in a certain way political.

CHAPTER 3. One would speak adequately if one were to attain the clarity that goes along with the underlying material, for precision ought not to be sought in the same way in all kinds of discourse, any more than in things made by the various kinds of craftsmen. The things that are beautiful and just, about which
30 politics investigates, involve great disagreement and inconsistency, so that they are thought to belong only to convention and not to nature. And the things that are good also involve some inconsistency of this sort, because harm results from them for many people, for before now some people have been ruined by wealth, and others by courage. So one ought to be content, when speaking about
35 such things and reasoning from such things, to point out the truth roughly and in outline, and when speaking about things that are so for the most part, and reasoning from things of that sort, to reach conclusions that are also of that sort. And it is necessary also to take each of the things that are said in the same way, for it belongs to an educated person to look for just so much precision in

each kind of discourse as the nature of the thing one is concerned with admits; for to demand demonstrations from a rhetorician seems about like accepting probable conclusions from a mathematician.

All people are good at making distinctions about the things they are acquainted with, and each is a good judge of those things. Therefore, good judgment goes along with the way each one is educated, and the one who has been educated about everything has it in an unqualified way. For this reason, it is not appropriate for a young person to be a student of politics, since the young are inexperienced in the actions of life, while these are the things about which politics speaks and from which it reasons. Also, since the young are apt to follow their impulses, they would hear such discourses without purpose or benefit, since their end is not knowing but action. And it makes no difference whether one is young in age or immature in character, for the deficiency doesn't come from the time, but from living in accord with feeling and following every impulse. For knowledge comes to such people without profit, as it does to those who lack self-restraint; but to those who keep their desires in proportion and act in that way, knowing about these things would be of great benefit.

About the one who is to hear this discourse, and how it ought to be received, and what task we have set before ourselves, let these things serve as a prelude.

CHAPTER 4. Now taking up the thread again, since every kind of knowing and every choice reach toward some good, let us say what it is that we claim politics aims at, and what, of all the goods aimed at by action, is the highest. In name, this is pretty much agreed about by the majority of people, for most people, as well as those who are more refined, say it is happiness, and assume that living well and doing well are the same thing as being happy. But about happiness—what it is—they are in dispute, and most people do not give the same account of it as the wise. Some people take it to be something visible and obvious, such as pleasure or wealth or honor, and different ones say different things, and even the same person often says different things; when sick one thinks it is health, but when poor, that it is wealth, and when they are conscious of ignorance in themselves, people marvel at those who say it is something grand and above them. And some people believe that, besides these many good things, there is some other good, by itself, which is also responsible for the being good of all these other things.

Now to review all the opinions is perhaps rather pointless, and it would be sufficient to review the ones that come most to prominence or seem to have some account to give. And let it not escape our notice that arguments from first principles differ from those that go up toward first principles. For Plato rightly raised this question, and used to inquire whether the road is from first principles or up to first principles, just as, on a race course, the run is either

from the judges to the boundary or back again. One must begin from what is known, but this has two meanings, the things known to us and the things that are known simply. Perhaps then we, at any rate, ought to begin from the things that are known to us. This is why one who is going to listen adequately to discourse about things that are beautiful and just, and generally about things that pertain to political matters, needs to have been beautifully brought up by means of habits. For the primary thing is that something is so, and if this is sufficiently evident, there is no additional need for the reason why. And such a person either has or easily gets hold of the things that come first. If one neither has them nor has it in him to get hold of them, let him harken to Hesiod:

Altogether best is he who himself has insight into all things,
 But good in his turn is he who trusts one who speaks well.
 But whoever neither himself discerns, nor, harkening to another,
 Lays to heart what he says, that one for his part is a useless man.

CHAPTER 5. For our part, let us speak from the point where we digressed. Most people and the crudest people seem, not without reason, to assume from people's lives that pleasure is the good and is happiness. For this reason they are content with a life devoted to enjoyment. For there are three ways of life especially that hold prominence: the one just now mentioned, and the political life, and third, the contemplative life. Now most people show themselves to be completely slavish by choosing a life that belongs to fatted cattle, but they happen to get listened to because most people who have power share the feeling of Sardanapalus. But refined and active people choose honor, for this is pretty much the goal of political life. Now this appears to be too superficial to be what is sought, for it seems to be in the ones who give honor rather than in the one who is honored, but we divine that the good is something of one's own and hard to take away. Also, people seem to pursue honor in order to be convinced that they themselves are good. At any rate they seek to be honored by the wise and by those who know them, and for virtue; it is clear, then, that at least according to these people, virtue is something greater, and one might perhaps assume that this, rather than honor, is the end of the political life.

But even this seems too incomplete, since it seems possible, while having virtue, even to be asleep or to be inactive throughout life, and on top of these things, to suffer evils and the greatest misfortunes. No one would consider one who lived in that way to be happy, except when defending a hypothesis. And this is enough about these things, since they are spoken of sufficiently in the current popular writings. And the third way of life is the contemplative one, about which we shall make an investigation in what follows. The life of money making is a type of compulsory activity, and it is clear that wealth is not the good being sought,

since it is instrumental and for the sake of something else. For this reason one might suppose that the things spoken of before are more properly ends, since they provide contentment on account of themselves, though it appears that even they are not what is sought, even though many arguments connected with them are tossed around. So let these things be put aside. 5

CHAPTER 6. No doubt the better thing to do is to examine the universal good and go through the difficulties in the way it is spoken of, and yet such an inquiry becomes like trudging uphill because the men who introduced the forms were my friends. But no doubt it would be admitted to be better, indeed to be necessary when keeping the truth safe is at stake, even to abandon the things 10 that are one's own, both for other reasons and because we are philosophers; for while both [the truth and one's friends] are loved, it is a sacred thing to give the higher honor to the truth.

Now those who brought in this opinion did not make forms within which a primary and a derivative instance were spoken of (which is why they did not construct a form of number), but the good is attributed to what something is and also to the sort of thing it is and to a relation it has, while the thinghood of something, which is something on its own, by nature has priority over a relation it has (for this is like an offshoot and incidental attribute of what is), so that there could not be any form common to these. Further, since *good* is 20 meant in just as many ways as *being* is (for in the sense of what something is, the good is spoken of as, for instance, the good or the intellect; in the sense of being of a certain sort, it is spoken of as the excellences; in the sense of being a certain amount, it is spoken of as the proper limit; in the sense of being related to something, it is spoken of as the useful; in the sense of being some time, it is spoken of as an opportune moment; and in the sense of place, it is spoken 25 of as a dwelling or other things of that sort), it is clear that there could not be any common good that is one and universal, for if there were it could not have been meant in all the ways of attributing being but only in one.

Further, since, of the things that come under one form, there is also one kind 30 of knowledge, there would also be some one kind of knowledge of all things that are good, but as it is there are many, even of the good things that come under one way of attributing being; for example, of the opportune moment, in war, the knowledge of it is the general's art, while in disease it is the physician's art, and of the proper limit in food, the knowledge is the physician's art, 35 while in exercises it is the art of the gymnastic trainer. And one might raise the question even of what in the world they mean by speaking of each whatever-itself, seeing as how there is one and the same meaning for both a human being and the human-being-itself, namely the meaning of human-ness. For insofar

as something is a human being, there will be no difference, and if that is the way it is, there will be no difference either insofar as something is good. Surely it will not be any more good by being everlasting, inasmuch as a long-lasting thing is no more white than one that lasts only a day. The Pythagoreans seem to speak in a more credible way about the good, when they place one-ness in the column of good things, and Speusippus seems to have followed them. But about these things let there be some other discussion.

But a certain debatable point in the things that have been said comes to light, on the grounds that the arguments were not meant to be about every sort of good, but that the goods spoken of as coming under one form are those that are pursued, and with which people are satisfied, for their own sake, while the things that tend to produce these, or to preserve them in some way, or to prevent their opposites are spoken of as good by derivation from these and in a different way. It is clear, then, that good things would be meant in two ways, some on account of themselves and others derived from these. Then separating the things that are good in themselves from the useful things, let us examine whether the former are meant in accordance with one form. But what sort of things should one set down as good in themselves? Are they not those things that one pursues even when they are isolated from everything else, such as having good sense, or seeing, or certain pleasures and honors? For even if we pursue these things by reason of some other thing, one would still place them among things good in themselves. Or is there nothing else except the form that is good in itself? But then the form would be of no use. But if the things mentioned are among things good on account of themselves, the meaning of the good in all of these would have to show itself as the same, just as the meaning of whiteness is the same in snow and in lead paint. But of honor and good sense and pleasure there are distinct and divergent meanings of that by which they are good. Therefore there is not any good that is shared and comes under one form.

But then in what way is good meant? For these things certainly do not seem to have the same name by chance. But do they have the same name by being derived from one thing, or by all adding up together into one thing, or rather by analogy? For as sight is in relation to the body, intellect is in relation to the soul, and some other thing is in relation to something else. But perhaps these things ought to be let go for now, since to be precise about them would be more at home in another kind of philosophic inquiry. And it is similar with the form, for even if there is some one good that is attributed in common, or is something separate itself by itself, it is clear that it is not a thing done or possessed by a human being, and something of that sort is being looked for now. But perhaps it might seem to someone that it would be better to be acquainted with it with

a view to those good things that can be possessed or done; for having this as a sort of pattern, we would also know the things that are good for us better, and if we know them, we will hit upon them.

Now while the argument has a certain plausibility, it seems to be discordant with the kinds of knowledge we have, for all of them leave aside an acquaintance with the good itself in order to aim at some particular good and hunt for what they lack. And surely it is not reasonable that all those skilled in arts should be ignorant of, and not even look for, something of such great assistance. And it is impossible to say in what respect a weaver or a carpenter will be benefitted in relation to his art by knowing this good itself, or how one who has beheld the form itself will be a better doctor or general. For it appears that the doctor does not consider health in that way, but the health of a human being, or perhaps rather that of this particular person, since he heals them each by each. So let these things have been spoken of just this much. 5 10

CHAPTER 7. And let us go back again to the good that is being sought, whatever it may be. For it seems to be a different thing in the medical art and the general's art, since it is a different thing in each different action and art, and similarly with the rest. What then is the good in each of them? Or is it that for the sake of which they do everything else? In the medical art this is health, in the general's art it is victory, in the housebuilder's art it is a house, and in a different art it is something else, and in every action and choice it is the end, since everyone does everything else for the sake of this. And so, if there is some end for all actions, this would be the good that belongs to action, and if there is more than one such end, these would constitute that good. So the argument, in transforming itself, has reached the same place; and one must try to make this still more clear. 15 20 25

Now since the ends seem to be more than one, while we choose some of them on account of something else, such as wealth, flutes, and instrumental things generally, it is clear that they are not all complete, but it is manifest that the highest good is something complete. So if there is some one thing alone that is complete, this would be what is being sought, but if there are more than one of them, it would be the most complete of these. And we say that a thing that is pursued on account of itself is more complete than a thing pursued on account of something else, and that what is never chosen on account of anything else is more complete than things chosen both for themselves and on account of something else, and hence that, in an unqualified sense, the complete is what is chosen always for itself and never on account of anything else. And happiness seems to be of this sort most of all, since we choose this always on account of itself and never on account of anything else, while we choose honor and pleasure 30 35

and intelligence and every virtue indeed on account of themselves (for even if nothing resulted from them we would choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, supposing that we will be happy by these means. But no one chooses happiness for the sake of these things, nor for the sake of anything else at all.

And the same thing appears to follow from its self-sufficiency, for the complete good seems to be self-sufficient. And by the self-sufficient we mean not what suffices for oneself alone, living one's life as a hermit, but also with parents and children and a wife, and friends and fellow citizens generally, since a human being is by nature meant for a city. But one must take some limit for these connections, since by stretching out to ancestors and descendants and friends of one's friends they go beyond all bounds; but this must be examined later. But we set down as self-sufficient that which, by itself, makes life choiceworthy and lacking in nothing, and such a thing we suppose happiness to be. What's more, we suppose happiness to be the most choiceworthy of all things while not counting it as one of those things, since if it were counted among them it is clear that it would be more choiceworthy together with the tiniest amount of additional good, for the thing added becomes a preeminence of good, and of good things, the greater is always more worthy of choice. So happiness appears to be something complete and self-sufficient, and is, therefore, the end of actions.

But perhaps to say that the highest good is happiness is obviously something undisputed, while it still begs to be said in a more clear and distinct way what happiness is. Now this might come about readily if one were to grasp the work of a human being. For just as with a flute player or sculptor or any artisan, and generally with those to whom some work or action belongs, the good and the doing it well seem to be in the work, so too it would seem to be the case with a human being, if indeed there is some work that belongs to one. But is there some sort of work for a carpenter or a leather worker, while for a human being there is none? Is a human being by nature idle? Or, just as for an eye or a hand or a foot or generally for each of the parts, there seems to be some sort of work, ought one also to set down some work beyond all these for the human being? But then what in the world would this be? For living seems to be something shared in even by plants, but something peculiarly human is being sought. Therefore, one must divide off the life that consists in nutrition and growth. Following this would be some sort of life that consists in perceiving, but this seems to be shared in by a horse and a cow and by every animal. So what remains is some sort of life that puts into action that in us that has articulate speech; of this capacity, one aspect is what is able to be persuaded by reason, while the other

is what has reason and thinks things through. And since this is still meant in two ways, one must set it down as a life in a state of being-at-work, since this seems to be the more governing meaning.

And if the work of a human being is a being-at-work of the soul in accordance with reason, or not without reason, while we say that the work of a certain sort of person is the same in kind as that of a serious person of that sort, as in the case of a harpist and of a serious harpist, and this is simply because in all cases the superiority in excellence is attached to the work, since the work of a harpist is to play the harp and the work of a serious harpist is the play the harp well—if this is so and we set down that the work of a human being is a certain sort of life, while this life consists of a being-at-work of the soul and actions that go along with reason, and it belongs to a man of serious stature to do these things well and beautifully, while each thing is accomplished well as a result of the virtue appropriate to it—if this is so, the human good comes to be disclosed as a being-at-work of the soul in accordance with virtue, and if the virtues are more than one, in accordance with the best and most complete virtue. But also, this must be in a complete life, for one swallow does not make a Spring, nor one day, and in the same way one day or a short time does not make a person blessed and happy.

So let the good have been sketched in outline in this way, for presumably one needs to rough it in first and then inscribe the details later. And it would seem to be in the power of anyone to carry forward and articulate things that are in good shape in the outline, and that time is a good discoverer of such things, or makes the work easier; in fact the advances in the arts have come from this, since it is in anyone's power to add what is left out. But it behooves one to remember the things that were said before, and not to look for precision in the same way in all things, but in accordance with the underlying material in each case, and to the extent that it is appropriate to that course of inquiry. For both a carpenter and a geometrician look for a right angle, but in different ways, for the one seeks it to the extent that it is useful to the work, while the other seeks for what it is or what it is a property of, since he is someone who beholds the truth. So one ought to do the same in other things, so that side issues do not become greater than the work being done.

And one ought not to demand a reason in all things alike, either, but it is sufficient in some cases for it to be shown beautifully that something is so, in particular such things as concern first principles; that something is so comes first and is a first principle. And of first principles, some are beheld by way of examples, others by sense perception, others by becoming experienced in some habit, and others in other ways. So one must try to go after each of them by the means that belong to its nature, and be serious about distinguishing them

rightly, since this has great weight in what follows. For the beginning seems to be more than half of the whole, and many of the things that are inquired after become illuminated along with it.