

# VIRTUE ETHICS

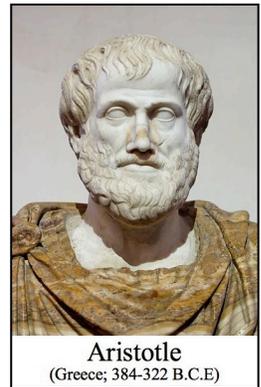
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“BY NATURE, ALL HUMAN BEINGS DESIRE TO KNOW.”

— Aristotle (384-322 BCE), *Metaphysics*

## [45] ARISTOTLE’S VIRTUES

At the age of seventeen, Aristotle (384-322 BCE) traveled from northern Greece to Athens where he hoped to study at Plato’s famous Academy. He must have liked what he found, since he stayed for nineteen years, eventually becoming one of the teachers. He left the Academy and Athens when Plato died in 347, but returned in 335 to open his own school at the Lyceum (a gymnasium and garden located near the temple of Apollo Lyceus). Aristotle is reported to have written dialogues after the manner of Plato, as well as the extensive lecture notes that he used in the classroom, and ancient readers of his dialogues claim that he was an exceptionally gifted writer. Unfortunately none of these dialogues survived many centuries past his death, and all that we have had available of Aristotle’s writings (at least for the last two thousand years or so) are his lecture notes. Some of these notes are highly polished, while others are rough and rather schematic, and much of their ordering was introduced later by ancient editors. But regardless of their literary merit, their philosophical and scientific importance is unsurpassed, and has affected the nature and growth of the western intellectual world in untold ways. Aristotle was a great scholar, scientist, and teacher, a giant of the past whose thoughts still move as a living force among us.



Two separate sets of his lecture notes on ethics have survived — the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemian Ethics*. The former is the more developed and important of the two; it has been widely read throughout the centuries, and is still a common text in undergraduate curricula around the world. Like so much of what Aristotle wrote, it is the first systematic discussion of ethics in recorded history. Much of interest is discussed in the ten books comprising the *Nicomachean Ethics*: the good, virtue and vice, justice, friendship, weakness of the will, pleasure and happiness. Perhaps it is because human nature has changed so little in the last twenty-five centuries that Aristotle’s observations in moral psychology still sound wholly familiar. In the following, I will outline a few themes from Books I and II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

## ETHICS AS THE SCIENCE OF HUMAN FLOURISHING

Science, according to Aristotle, is a systematic body of true beliefs, and all knowledge, in order to be knowledge, must be part of some science or other. To know something (for example, that water freezes at 0° Celsius) is not merely to entertain a true belief, but also to know *why* it is true; only then does one have *episteme* (the Greek word typically translated as “knowledge” but more accurately as “scientific knowledge”).

Aristotle viewed all of human knowledge as divided into three kinds of science: theoretical, practical, and productive. The productive sciences are those concerned with making something (such as the science of making pots, or of farming, or of writing poetry). The practical sciences concern how we are to behave among ourselves (two prominent examples here are political science and ethics). The theoretical sciences are concerned neither with production, nor with human action, but rather with *truth*, and Aristotle believed that the vast majority of science was theoretical, which he further divided into three parts: mathematics, natural science, and theology. But we must leave these divisions and return to the science of ethics.

Ethics is the systematic study of how humans ought to behave. The standard meaning of the Greek word *ethika*, as found in the title of Aristotle's work, is "matters to do with character" — and we find in reading the *Ethics* that much of it is indeed devoted to character and the ways in which a character might be virtuous or vicious.

*Arete* and *eudaimonia* are two other Greek words whose translation merits some discussion. *Arete* is typically translated as "virtue," but it is often better translated as "excellence." For instance, one can speak meaningfully of a knife having *arete*, but a "virtuous knife" sounds distinctly odd in English; what is meant here is that the knife is *excellent*, that it performs its function well. So when Aristotle speaks of human virtue, remember that he has human excellence in mind. Finally, *eudaimonia* is typically translated as happiness, but this translation can also be misleading since the English word 'happiness' is sometimes understood to refer to a mere state of mind — and *eudaimonia* is never merely that. A more accurate translation of *eudaimonia* would be "human flourishing." When Aristotle considers the meaning of happiness, he is really considering what it means to flourish, to be successful in one's life.

### PRECISION IN ETHICS

Insofar as humans should make themselves excellent and to flourish, ethics is the science of human flourishing. And what exactly should we expect from this science of human flourishing? Guidance, but not with mathematical precision. As Aristotle famously points out,

precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions.... It is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs. [Bk. 1, ch. 3]

That we lack mathematical precision in ethics does not make it all a matter of opinion, without hopes of becoming a science (that is, a well-ordered body of knowledge). Consider the analogy of cabinet-making and framing a house. Expert cabinet-making might require keeping your measurements to the nearest  $1/32^{\text{nd}}$  of an inch, but expert framing does not demand such precision; the nearest  $1/4$  inch is all that is needed or desired. Being more precise will not result in a better house, and striving for such accuracy is not the mark of an expert craftsman, but rather of one who misunderstands his craft. Just as we can build a fine house without measuring each wall stud to the nearest  $1/32^{\text{nd}}$  of an inch, we can construct a perfectly useable science of morality, even though we lack the precision of a geometric proof.

### DIFFERENT WAYS OF DESIRING THE GOOD

Aristotle begins his discussion of ethics with the observation that "every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim" [Bk. I, ch. 1]. In other words, the good is what we desire, and what we desire is a wide variety of products and activities. Insofar as we desire them, they are good in some sense: If we desire them for their own sake, then they are **final goods**; if we desire them for the sake of obtaining something else, then they are **instrumental goods**.

What Aristotle calls the **highest good** is that which we desire for its own sake, and never for the sake of another. As it turns out, there is such a highest good, and we all agree that it is called *eudaimonia* (happiness, flourishing): "both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and doing well with being happy" [Bk. I, ch. 4].

But what is happiness? Here we find great disagreement. Some say pleasure, others honor, and still others knowledge [ch. 5]. Determining the nature of happiness occupies a major portion of the *Ethics* — but then this topic is no small matter. Aristotle is asking here perhaps the most important question of our lives, a question with several forms but one subject: What is the successful human life? What is the good life? How ought I to live?

## HAPPINESS, FUNCTION, AND VIRTUE

The *final good* is chosen for its own sake and is self-sufficient (it doesn't need or desire anything else), and it turns out that *happiness* is both of these [ch. 7]; but what, exactly, is the *nature* of happiness? If we ask what it means for "a flute-player, a sculptor, or an artist" to flourish or be successful, we find that in answering this we must first answer what it is that flute-players, sculptors, and artists are supposed to do — that is, we must first know what their function is. For them to be successful, they need to be able to perform their function well. So, before we can determine what counts as our happiness or flourishing, we must first determine our function — and not the function of this man or that woman, but the function common to *all* humans.

The **function** (Greek: *ergon*) of a thing is whatever that thing alone can do, or that it can do best. The function of humans, therefore, will need to be an activity natural to humans that either isn't found in other kinds of beings at all or, if found, does not occur to the same degree as it does in humans.

Aristotle works through his standard list of functions for living things (what he calls "souls" in his treatise, *On the Soul*), namely, nutrition and growth, perception, and reason. It is with this last activity that Aristotle feels he has found something unique to human beings. "The function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle" [Bk. I, ch. 7]. What Aristotle seems to mean by this is that our function is to order our lives according to reason.

Having located the human function, Aristotle concludes that human happiness consists in performing this function *well*, that is, to do it in an excellent or virtuous manner. Thus, human good is "an activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete" [ch. 7]; and again, "happiness is an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue" [ch. 13].

## VIRTUE AND THE PARTS OF THE SOUL

Once Aristotle finds that virtue concerns the functioning of the soul, he turns to consider the soul's nature and finds that it has two parts or principles, one rational and the other irrational.

Virtue	Excellence in:	Acquired:	Aiming at:	Requiring:	Examples
Moral (character)	practical sphere	habit	intelligent conduct	<i>phronesis</i>	liberality, temperance
Intellectual	theoretical sphere	learning	discovering truth	experience and time	<i>sophia</i> , <i>phronesis</i>

The irrational part is itself divided in two: the *nutritive* part concerns the body's nutrition and growth, and the *appetitive* part concerns our desires. These two irrational parts differ also in that the appetitive part is susceptible to the influence of reason, "in so far as it listens to and obeys it" [ch. 13]. This suggests that reason plays two different roles in our lives, one practical and the other theoretical. *Practical reason* guides our appetites and emotions with correct principles of action, while *theoretical reason* works on its own, seeking truth.

Human virtue is to attain excellence in both the practical and the theoretical areas of reason's influence, and so we have two different sorts of virtue: **moral virtue** (or virtue of character), which concerns the influence of reason over the appetitive part of the soul, and **intellectual virtue**, which concerns the actions of the rational part of the soul insofar as it seeks truth. There are two intellectual virtues mentioned here — wisdom (*sophia*) and prudence (*phronesis*) — and several more moral virtues (liberality and temperance are two examples that he provides in chapter thirteen).

How do we acquire these virtues, once we decide this is the path of human flourishing? Aristotle turns to this question at the beginning of Book Two:

Intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name (*ethike*) is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word *ethos* (habit). From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature. For instance, the stone which by nature moves downwards cannot be habituated to move upwards, not even if one tries to train it by throwing it up ten thousand times; nor can fire be habituated to move downwards, nor can anything else that by nature behaves in one way be trained to behave in another. Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.

## MORAL VIRTUE: HABITUALLY NAVIGATING BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS

The woman or man of moral virtue becomes virtuous through practice, by acting virtuously. But performing these actions is not sufficient for being virtuous. Aristotle notes that a person of virtue must also **perform the action in the right way**: she must *know* that it is the virtuous thing to do (it can't be only coincidentally virtuous), she must choose the action for its own sake (and not as a means to some other end, such as glory, honor, pleasure, or wealth), and she must choose and act "from a firm and unchangeable character" (i.e., her virtuous actions must become habitual) [Bk. II, ch. 4]. Moral virtue, it turns out, is neither a passion nor a faculty, but rather a *state of character* (a disposition, the way that a person behaves habitually) [ch. 5]; in particular, moral virtue is that state of character which aims at the *intermediate* or *mean* between excess and deficiency [chs. 5-6].

One of the many trials of Odysseus during his return home from the Trojan War involved steering his ship between Scylla and Charybdis (traditionally understood as the Straits of Messina, between Sicily and the Italian peninsula). Scylla was a six-headed monster that ate sailors who ventured too close, while Charybdis was a huge mouth that gulped water, creating ship-devouring whirlpools. Steering a course between these two dangers was not easy, and Aristotle viewed the moral life as involving the same sort of challenge.

In nearly all that we do and in the way that we are, our actions and passions can suffer from either the **vice of deficiency** or the **vice of excess**. For instance, with respect to the passions of boldness and fear: if we follow boldness too much and fear too little, then we suffer the vice of being rash; if, on the other hand, we follow boldness too little and fear too much, we suffer the vice of being cowardly. The virtuous person aims for the intermediate between these two, which Aristotle calls *courage*. With respect to the desire to amuse others, *wittiness* is the virtue, while the vice of excess is buffoonery, and the vice of deficiency, boorishness. Aristotle offers a handful of other examples in Books 3 and 4.

Aristotle also notes that some actions and passions have no mean or intermediate state, and so are always bad — for example, spite, envy, adultery, theft, or murder [ch. 6].

Finally, Aristotle points out that it is rarely easy to determine the proper mean, and thus to be good:

That moral virtue is a mean...has been sufficiently stated. Hence also it is no easy task to be good. For in everything it is no easy task to find the middle, e.g. to find the middle of a circle is not for every one but for him who knows; so, too, any one can get angry — that is easy — or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, that is not for every one, nor is it easy; wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble. [Bk. II, ch. 9]

Ethics does not enjoy the same level of precision as does physics or mathematics (as noted above). Nor is the mean the same with every person or in every situation. One cannot know in advance what the proper action or response will be, and therefore it is impossible to write a rule book of moral behavior, that we need simply consult. Determining the mean is an art of judgment, and doing this well requires practice and experience — it requires the practical wisdom (*phronesis*) that only experience can confer.

To help us out, Aristotle offers **three rules of thumb** (Bk. II, ch. 9). First, avoid that extreme which is furthest from the mean (in other words, pursue the lesser of the two evils). Second, pay attention to that extreme to which you are most attracted, and drag yourself in the opposite direction. Finally, always be on your guard against the pleasurable. While there is certainly nothing wrong with pleasure, we typically fail to judge actions impartially when pleasure is at stake, because pleasure is something toward which we all are naturally inclined, and so the risk of error is always higher here.

## THE SUCCESSFUL LIFE

The successful life is the virtuous life, and the virtuous life is where we excel at being human, and what distinguishes us as human is the rational part of our souls. We have seen that this rational part of the soul — reason — is both practical and theoretical: *practical* insofar as it restrains our appetites and guides our conduct, and *theoretical* insofar as it participates in the theoretical sciences (seeking truth regardless of practical application). Because the

theoretical use of reason is the most pure use (since it is reason operating all alone, and not mixing with the appetites), the most flourishing life of all is one devoted to the intellectual virtues — a life, in other words, devoted to learning. This may not strike the average college student as a point of comfort — that what they are doing right now is the best that any human could ever hope for — but that's how Aristotle viewed the matter.

## READING

### *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS* (SELECTION)

Aristotle

*Aristotle (384-322 BCE) was born in Stagira in northern Greece (Macedon), the son of a physician. He traveled to Athens to study at Plato's Academy at the age of seventeen, and then stayed on to teach, remaining until Plato's death in 347.*

*Aristotle left Athens for a few years, and then around 343 began a three-year stint tutoring the thirteen-year-old son of King Phillip II of Macedon (this son would later be known as "Alexander the Great"). In 335, Aristotle returned to Athens and founded his own school, the Lyceum. By the end of his life, Aristotle had written a wide-ranging body of text that served as the intellectual foundation for much of the European tradition. He was an excellent scientist for his time — with a focus on biology — and a careful philosopher. His major ethical writing, the *Nicomachean Ethics* (named after his son Nicomachus), remains as one of the most influential texts on moral theory in the western world. As with all of his remaining writings, this text consists of lecture notes that Aristotle used while teaching in the Lyceum. What follows is an abridgment of the first two books of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (as translated from the Greek by W. D. Ross, with modifications).*

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#### BOOK I CHAPTER 1

EVERY art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. But a certain difference is found among ends; some are activities, others are products apart from the activities that produce them. Where there are ends apart from the actions, it is the nature of the products to be better than the activities. Now, as there are many actions, arts, and sciences, their ends

also are many; the end of the medical art is health, that of shipbuilding a vessel, that of strategy victory, that of economics wealth. But where such arts fall under a single capacity — as bridle-making and the other arts concerned with the equipment of horses fall under the art of riding, and this and every military action under strategy, in the same way other arts fall under yet others — in all of these, the ends of the master arts are to be preferred to all the subordinate ends; for it is for the sake of the former that the latter are pursued. It makes no difference whether the activities themselves are the ends of the actions, or something else apart from the activities, as in the case of the sciences just mentioned.

#### CHAPTER 2

If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right? If so, we must try, in outline at least, to determine what it is, and of which of the sciences or capacities it is the object. [...]

#### CHAPTER 3

Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products of the crafts. Now fine and just

actions, which political science investigates, admit of much variety and fluctuation of opinion, so that they may be thought to exist only by convention, and not by nature. And goods also give rise to a similar fluctuation because they bring harm to many people; for before now people have been undone by reason of their wealth, and others by reason of their courage. We must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premises to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true and with premises of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better. In the same spirit, therefore, should each type of statement be received; for it is the mark of an educated person to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs. [...]

#### CHAPTER 4

Let us resume our inquiry and state, in view of the fact that all knowledge and every pursuit aims at some good, what it is that we say political science aims at and what is the highest of all goods achievable by action. Verbally there is very general agreement; for both the general run of people and those of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and doing well with being happy; but with regard to what happiness is they differ, and the many do not give the same account as the wise. For the former think it is some plain and obvious thing, like pleasure, wealth, or honor; they differ, however, from one another — and often even the same person identifies it with different things, with health when he is ill, with wealth when he is poor; but, conscious of their ignorance, they admire those who proclaim some great ideal that is above their comprehension. Now some thought that apart from these many goods there is another which is self-subsistent and causes the goodness of all these as well. [...]

#### CHAPTER 5

Let us, however, resume our discussion from the point at which we digressed. For it would seem that people quite reasonably reach their conception of the good, i.e., of happiness, from the lives they lead; for

there are roughly three most favored lives: the lives of enjoyment, of political activity, and of study.

The many, the most vulgar, seem (and not without some ground) to identify the good, or happiness, with pleasure; which is the reason why they love the life of enjoyment. Here they appear quite slavish in their tastes, preferring a life suitable to beasts, but they get some ground for their view from the fact that many of those in high places share the tastes of Sardanapallus.

A consideration of the prominent types of life shows that people of superior refinement and of active disposition identify happiness with honor; for this is, roughly speaking, the end of the political life. But it seems too superficial to be what we are looking for, since it is thought to depend on those who bestow honor rather than on those who receive it, but the good we divine to be something proper to a person and not easily taken from him. Further, people seem to pursue honor in order that they may be assured of their goodness; at least it is by those of practical wisdom that they seek to be honored, and among those who know them, and on the ground of their virtue; clearly, then, according to them, at any rate, virtue is better. And perhaps one might even suppose this to be, rather than honor, the end of the political life. But even this appears somewhat incomplete; for possession of virtue seems actually compatible with being asleep, or with lifelong inactivity, and, further, with the greatest sufferings and misfortunes; but a person who was living so no one would call happy, unless he were maintaining a thesis at all costs. But enough of this; for the subject has been sufficiently treated even in the current discussions. Third comes the contemplative life, which we shall consider later.

The life of money-making is one undertaken under compulsion, and wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else. [...]

#### CHAPTER 7

Let us again return to the good we are seeking, and ask what it can be. It seems different in different actions and arts; it is different in medicine, in strategy, and in the other arts likewise. What then is the good of each? Surely that for whose sake everything else is done. In medicine this is health, in strategy victory, in architecture a house, in any other sphere something

else, and in every action and pursuit the end; for it is for the sake of this that all people do whatever else they do. Therefore, if there is an end for all that we do, this will be the good achievable by action, and if there are more than one, these will be the goods achievable by action.

So the argument has by a different course reached the same point; but we must try to state this even more clearly. Since there are evidently more than one end, and we choose some of these (e.g., wealth, flutes, and in general instruments) for the sake of something else, clearly not all ends are final ends; but the chief good is evidently something final. Therefore, if there is only one final end, this will be what we are seeking, and if there are more than one, the most final of these will be what we are seeking. Now we call that which is in itself worthy of pursuit more final than that which is worthy of pursuit for the sake of something else, and that which is never desirable for the sake of something else more final than the things that are desirable both in themselves and for the sake of that other thing, and therefore we call final without qualification that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else.

Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else, but honor, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that by means of them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself.

From the point of view of self-sufficiency the same result seems to follow; for the final good is thought to be self-sufficient [...which] we now define as that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing; and such we think happiness to be. [...] Happiness, then, is something final and self-sufficient, and is the end of action.

Presumably, however, to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account of what it is, is still desired. This might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function of a human being. For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or an artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in

the function, so would it seem to be for a human being, if a human being has a function. Have the carpenter, then, and the tanner certain functions or activities, while a human being has none? Is he born without a function? Or as eye, hand, foot, and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one likewise ascribe to the human being a function besides all of these?

What then can this be? Life seems to be common even to plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to human beings. Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but it also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle; of this, one part has such a principle in the sense of being obedient to one, the other in the sense of possessing one and exercising thought. And, as 'life of the rational element' also has two meanings, we must state that life in the sense of activity is what we mean; for this seems to be the more proper sense of the term. Now if the function of human beings is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle, and if we say 'so-and-so' and 'a good so-and-so' have a function which is the same in kind, e.g. a lyre, and a good lyre-player, and so without qualification in all cases, eminence in respect of goodness being added to the name of the function (for the function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre, and that of a good lyre-player is to do so well): if this is the case, and we state the function of the human being to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good human being to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete.

But we must add 'in a complete life.' For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a person blessed and happy. [...]

### CHAPTER 13

Since happiness is an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue, we must consider the nature of virtue; for perhaps we shall thus see better the nature of

happiness. The true student of politics, too, is thought to have studied virtue above all things; for he wishes to make his fellow citizens good and obedient to the laws. As an example of this we have the lawgivers of the Cretans and the Spartans, and any others of the kind that there may have been. And if this inquiry belongs to political science, clearly the pursuit of it will be in accordance with our original plan. But clearly the virtue we must study is human virtue; for the good we were seeking was human good and the happiness human happiness. By human virtue we mean not that of the body but that of the soul; and happiness also we call an activity of soul. But if this is so, clearly the student of politics must know somehow the facts about the soul, as the one who is to heal the eyes or the body as a whole must know about the eyes or the body; and all the more since politics is more prized and better than medicine; but even among doctors the best educated spend much labor on acquiring knowledge of the body. The student of politics, then, must study the soul, and must study it with these objects in view, and do so just to the extent which is sufficient for the questions we are discussing; for further precision is perhaps something more laborious than our purposes require.

Some things are said about it, adequately enough, even in the discussions outside our school, and we must use these; e.g. that one element in the soul is irrational and one has a rational principle. Whether these are separated as the parts of the body or of anything divisible are, or are distinct by definition but by nature inseparable, like convex and concave in the circumference of a circle, does not affect the present question.

Of the irrational element one division seems to be widely distributed, and vegetative in its nature, I mean that which causes nutrition and growth; for it is this kind of power of the soul that one must assign to all nurslings and to embryos, and this same power to full-grown creatures; this is more reasonable than to assign some different power to them. Now the excellence of this seems to be common to all species and not specifically human; for this part or faculty seems to function most in sleep, while goodness and badness are least manifest in sleep (whence comes the saying that the happy are not better off than the wretched for half their lives; and this happens naturally enough, since sleep is an inactivity of the soul in that respect in which it is called good or bad), unless perhaps to a

small extent some of the movements actually penetrate to the soul, and in this respect the dreams of good people are better than those of ordinary people. Enough of this subject, however; let us leave the nutritive faculty alone, since it has by its nature no share in human excellence.

There seems to be also another irrational element in the soul — one which in a sense, however, shares in a rational principle. For we praise the rational principle of the continent person and of the incontinent, and the part of their soul that has such a principle, since it urges them aright and towards the best objects; but there is found in them also another element naturally opposed to the rational principle, which fights against and resists that principle. For exactly as paralyzed limbs when we intend to move them to the right turn on the contrary to the left, so is it with the soul; the impulses of incontinent people move in contrary directions. But while in the body we see that which moves astray, in the soul we do not. No doubt, however, we must nonetheless suppose that in the soul too there is something contrary to the rational principle, resisting and opposing it. In what sense it is distinct from the other elements does not concern us. Now even this seems to have a share in a rational principle, as we said; at any rate in the continent person it obeys the rational principle and presumably in the temperate and brave person it is still more obedient; for in him it speaks, on all matters, with the same voice as the rational principle.

Therefore the irrational element also appears to be two-fold. For the vegetative element in no way shares in a rational principle, but the appetitive and in general the desiring element in a sense shares in it, in so far as it listens to and obeys it; this is the sense in which we speak of ‘taking account’ of one’s father or one’s friends, not that in which we speak of accounting for a mathematical property. That the irrational element is in some sense persuaded by a rational principle is indicated also by the giving of advice and by all reproof and exhortation. And if this element also must be said to have a rational principle, that which has a rational principle (as well as that which has not) will be twofold, one subdivision having it in the strict sense and in itself, and the other having a tendency to obey as one does one’s father.

Virtue too is distinguished into kinds in accordance with this difference; for we say that some of the virtues

are intellectual and others moral, theoretical wisdom [*sophia*] and practical wisdom [*phronesis*] being intellectual, liberality and temperance moral. For in speaking about a person's character we do not say that he is wise or has understanding but that he is good-tempered or temperate; yet we praise the wise person also with respect to his state of mind; and of states of mind we call those which merit praise virtues.

## BOOK II

### CHAPTER 1

VIRTUE, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name (*ethike*) is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word *ethos* (habit). From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature. For instance, the stone which by nature moves downwards cannot be habituated to move upwards, not even if one tries to train it by throwing it up ten thousand times; nor can fire be habituated to move downwards, nor can anything else that by nature behaves in one way be trained to behave in another. Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.

Again, of all the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity (this is plain in the case of the senses; for it was not by often seeing or often hearing that we got these senses, but on the contrary we had them before we used them, and did not come to have them by using them); but the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g., people become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts. [...]

Again, it is from the same causes and by the same means that every virtue is both produced and destroyed, and similarly every art; for it is from playing the lyre that both good and bad lyre-players are produced. And the corresponding statement is true of builders and of

all the rest; people will be good or bad builders as a result of building well or badly. For if this were not so, there would have been no need of a teacher, but all people would have been born good or bad at their craft. This, then, is the case with the virtues also; by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other people we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly. The same is true of appetites and feelings of anger; some people become temperate and good-tempered, others self-indulgent and irascible, by behaving in one way or the other in the appropriate circumstances. Thus, in one word, states of character arise out of like activities. This is why the activities we exhibit must be of a certain kind; it is because the states of character correspond to the differences between these. It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference. [...]

### CHAPTER 4

The question might be asked, what we mean by saying that we must become just by doing just acts, and temperate by doing temperate acts; for if people do just and temperate acts, they are already just and temperate, exactly as, if they do what is in accordance with the laws of grammar and of music, they are grammarians and musicians.

Or is this not true even of the arts? It is possible to do something that is in accordance with the laws of grammar, either by chance or at the suggestion of another. A person will be a grammarian, then, only when he has both done something grammatical and done it grammatically; and this means doing it in accordance with the grammatical knowledge in himself.

Again, the case of the arts and that of the virtues are not similar; for the products of the arts have their goodness in themselves, so that it is enough that they should have a certain character, but if the acts that are in accordance with the virtues have themselves a certain character it does not follow that they are done justly or temperately. The agent also must be in a certain condition when he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character.

These are not reckoned in as conditions of the possession of the arts, except the bare knowledge; but as a condition of the possession of the virtues knowledge has little or no weight, while the other conditions count not for a little but for everything, i.e. the very conditions which result from often doing just and temperate acts.

Actions, then, are called just and temperate when they are such as the just or the temperate person would do; but it is not the person who does these that is just and temperate, but the person who also does them as just and temperate people do them. It is well said, then, that it is by doing just acts that the just person is produced, and by doing temperate acts the temperate person; without doing these no one would have even a prospect of becoming good.

But most people do not do these, but take refuge in theory and think they are being philosophers and will become good in this way, behaving somewhat like patients who listen attentively to their doctors, but do none of the things they are ordered to do. As the latter will not be made well in body by such a course of treatment, the former will not be made well in soul by such a course of philosophy.

#### CHAPTER 5

Next we must consider what virtue is. Since things that are found in the soul are of three kinds — passions, faculties, states of character — virtue must be one of these. By passions I mean appetite, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, friendly feeling, hatred, longing, emulation, pity, and in general the feelings that are accompanied by pleasure or pain; by faculties the things in virtue of which we are said to be capable of feeling these, e.g. of becoming angry or being pained or feeling pity; by states of character the things in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to the passions, e.g. with reference to anger we stand badly if we feel it violently or too weakly, and well if we feel it moderately; and similarly with reference to the other passions.

Now neither the virtues nor the vices are *passions*, because we are not called good or bad on the ground of our passions, but are so called on the ground of our virtues and our vices, and because we are neither praised nor blamed for our passions (for the person who feels fear or anger is not praised, nor is the person who simply feels anger blamed, but the person who feels it in a

certain way), but for our virtues and our vices we are praised or blamed.

Again, we feel anger and fear without choice, but the virtues are modes of choice or involve choice. Further, in respect of the passions we are said to be moved, but in respect of the virtues and the vices we are said not to be moved but to be disposed in a particular way.

For these reasons also they are not *faculties*; for we are neither called good nor bad, nor praised nor blamed, for the simple capacity of feeling the passions; again, we have the faculties by nature, but we are not made good or bad by nature; we have spoken of this before. If, then, the virtues are neither passions nor faculties, all that remains is that they should be *states of character*. Thus we have stated what virtue is in respect of its genus.

#### CHAPTER 6

We must, however, not only describe virtue as a state of character, but also say what sort of state it is. We may remark, then, that every virtue or excellence both brings into good condition the thing of which it is the excellence and makes the work of that thing be done well; e.g. the excellence of the eye makes both the eye and its work good; for it is by the excellence of the eye that we see well. Similarly the excellence of the horse makes a horse both good in itself and good at running and at carrying its rider and at awaiting the attack of the enemy. Therefore, if this is true in every case, the virtue of a person also will be the state of character which makes that person good and which makes one do one's own work well.

How this is to happen we have stated already, but it will be made plain also by the following consideration of the specific nature of virtue. In everything that is continuous and divisible it is possible to take more, less, or an equal amount, and that either in terms of the thing itself or relatively to us; and the equal is an intermediate between excess and defect. By the intermediate in the object I mean that which is equidistant from each of the extremes, which is one and the same for all people; by the intermediate relatively to us that which is neither too much nor too little — and this is not one, nor the same for all. For instance, if ten is many and two is few, six is the intermediate, taken in terms of the object; for it exceeds and is exceeded by an equal amount; this is intermediate according to arithmetical

proportion. But the intermediate relatively to us is not to be taken so; if ten pounds are too much for a particular person to eat and two too little, it does not follow that the trainer will order six pounds; for this also is perhaps too much for the person who is to take it, or too little — too little for Milo, too much for the beginner in athletic exercises. The same is true of running and wrestling. Thus a master of any art avoids excess and defect, but seeks the intermediate and chooses this — the intermediate — not in the object but relatively to us.

If it is thus, then, that every art does its work well by looking to the intermediate and judging its works by this standard (so that we often say of good works of art that it is not possible either to take away or to add anything, implying that excess and defect destroy the goodness of works of art, while the mean preserves it; and good artists, as we say, look to this in their work), and if, further, virtue is more exact and better than any art, as nature also is, then virtue must have the quality of aiming at the intermediate. I mean moral virtue; for it is this that is concerned with passions and actions, and in these there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. For instance, both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue. Similarly with regard to actions also there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. Now virtue is concerned with passions and actions, in which excess is a form of failure, and so is defect, while the intermediate is praised and is a form of success; and being praised and being successful are both characteristics of virtue. Therefore virtue is a kind of mean, since, as we have seen, it aims at what is intermediate.

Again, it is possible to fail in many ways (for evil belongs to the class of the unlimited, as the Pythagoreans conjectured, and good to that of the limited), while to succeed is possible only in one way (for which reason also one is easy and the other difficult — to miss the mark easy, to hit it difficult); for these reasons also, then, excess and defect are characteristic of vice, and the mean of virtue, “for people are good in but one way, but bad in many.”

Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the person of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate. Hence in respect of its substance and the definition which states its essence virtue is a mean, with regard to what is best and right an extreme.

But not every action nor every passion admits of a mean; for some have names that already imply badness, e.g., spite, shamelessness, envy, and in the case of actions adultery, theft, murder; for all of these and such-like things imply by their names that they are themselves bad, and not the excesses or deficiencies of them. It is not possible, then, ever to be right with regard to them; one must always be wrong. Nor does goodness or badness with regard to such things depend on committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way, but simply to do any of them is to go wrong. It would be equally absurd, then, to expect that in unjust, cowardly, and voluptuous action there should be a mean, an excess, and a deficiency; for at that rate there would be a mean of excess and of deficiency, an excess of excess, and a deficiency of deficiency. But as there is no excess and deficiency of temperance and courage because what is intermediate is in a sense an extreme, so too of the actions we have mentioned there is no mean nor any excess and deficiency, but however they are done they are wrong; for in general there is neither a mean of excess and deficiency, nor excess and deficiency of a mean.

## CHAPTER 7

We must, however, not only make this general statement, but also apply it to the individual facts. For among statements about conduct those which are general apply more widely, but those which are particular are more genuine, since conduct has to do with individual cases, and our statements must harmonize with the facts in these cases. We may take these cases from our table. With regard to feelings of fear and confidence courage is the mean; of the people who exceed, he who

exceeds in fearlessness has no name (many of the states have no name), while the person who exceeds in confidence is rash, and he who exceeds in fear and falls short in confidence is a coward. With regard to pleasures and pains — not all of them, and not so much with regard to the pains — the mean is temperance, the excess self-indulgence. Persons deficient with regard to the pleasures are not often found; hence such persons also have received no name. But let us call them ‘insensible’.

With regard to giving and taking of money the mean is liberality, the excess and the defect prodigality and meanness. In these actions people exceed and fall short in contrary ways; the prodigal exceeds in spending and falls short in taking, while the mean person exceeds in taking and falls short in spending. (At present we are giving a mere outline or summary, and are satisfied with this; later these states will be more exactly determined.) [...]

### CHAPTER 9

That moral virtue is a mean, then, and in what sense it is so, and that it is a mean between two vices, the one involving excess, the other deficiency, and that it is such because its character is to aim at what is intermediate in passions and in actions, has been sufficiently stated. Hence also it is no easy task to be good. For in everything it is no easy task to find the middle, e.g. to find the middle of a circle is not for every one but for him who knows; so, too, any one can get angry — that is easy — or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, that is not for every one, nor is it easy; wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble.

Hence he who aims at the intermediate must first depart from what is the more contrary to it, as Calypso advises —

*Hold the ship out beyond that surf and spray.*

For of the extremes one is more erroneous, one less so; therefore, since to hit the mean is hard in the extreme, we must as a second best, as people say, take the least of the evils; and this will be done best in the way we describe. But we must consider the things towards which we ourselves also are easily carried away; for some of us tend to one thing, some to another; and this will be recognizable from the pleasure and the pain we feel. We must drag ourselves away to the contrary extreme; for we shall get into the intermediate state by drawing well away from error, as people do in straightening sticks that are bent.

Now in everything the pleasant or pleasure is most to be guarded against; for we do not judge it impartially. We ought, then, to feel towards pleasure as the elders of the people felt towards Helen, and in all circumstances repeat their saying; for if we dismiss pleasure thus we are less likely to go astray. It is by doing this, then, (to sum the matter up) that we shall best be able to hit the mean.

But this is no doubt difficult, and especially in individual cases; for it is not easy to determine both how and with whom and on what provocation and how long one should be angry; for we too sometimes praise those who fall short and call them good-tempered, but sometimes we praise those who get angry and call them manly. The person, however, who deviates little from goodness is not blamed, whether he do so in the direction of the more or of the less, but only the person who deviates more widely; for he does not fail to be noticed. But up to what point and to what extent a person must deviate before he becomes blameworthy it is not easy to determine by reasoning, any more than anything else that is perceived by the senses; such things depend on particular facts, and the decision rests with perception. So much, then, is plain, that the intermediate state is in all things to be praised, but that we must incline sometimes towards the excess, sometimes towards the deficiency; for so shall we most easily hit the mean and what is right.