ARISTOTLE'S NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

A NEW TRANSLATION BY

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ARISTOTLE'S
Nicomachean Ethics

TRANSLATED, WITH AN
INTERPRETIVE ESSAY,
NOTES, AND GLOSSARY BY
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Book 1

CHAPTER ONE

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action as well as choice, is held to aim at some good. 1 Hence people have nobly 2 declared that the good is that at which all things aim. But there appears to be a certain difference among the ends: some ends are activities, others are certain works apart from the activities themselves, and in those cases in which there are certain ends apart from the actions, the works are naturally better than the activities. 3

1 · Aristotle introduces several central terms here: technē, a technical art or craft, such as shoemaking, and the knowledge that goes together with it; praxis, action, which issues from the parts of the soul characterized by longing and desiring; and proaireseis, choice, closely tied to action. See the glossary for these and other key terms. The verb Aristotle uses here for "is held to" (dikein) is related to the noun translated as "opinion" (doxa); it may mean simply that something "seems" to be the case or that it is "held" to be so by opinion.

2 · Kalos: the adverb related to a central term, to kalon, which has a range of meanings for which English requires at least three: "noble," "beautiful," and "fine." It denotes (physical) beauty but also and above all, in the Ethica, what is admirable in a moral sense. It will be translated most frequently as "the noble" ("noble," "nobly," "in a noble manner") and, in the rare cases in which it refers unambiguously to physical beauty, as "beautiful." In the present instance, Aristotle may say that the declaration in question is a "noble" one because it expresses a noble sentiment—that all things aim at the good—but not necessarily a true one: the conclusion drawn does not in fact follow from the premises given in the first sentence.

3 · Another set of key terms is introduced here: telē (singular, teles), the "end" or goal of a thing; see also teleios, n. 37 below. Energeiai (singular, energeia), "activity," means the state of being engaged in an act or the carrying out of a deed (ergon); it is thus related to the next term, erga (singular, ergon). Ergon cannot be captured by one English word; it may be translated as "work," "product," "task" or—especially when used in contrast to "speech" (logos)—"deed."
Book 2

CHAPTER ONE

Virtue, then, is twofold, intellectual and moral. Both the coming-into-being and increase of intellectual virtue result mostly from teaching—hence it requires experience and time—whereas moral virtue is the result of habit, and so it is that moral virtue got its name [ἐθικὴ] by a slight alteration of the term habit [ἐθος]. It is also clear, as a result, that none of the moral virtues are present in us by nature, since nothing that exists by nature is habituated to be other than it is. For example, a stone, because it is borne downward by nature, could not be habituated to be borne upward, not even if someone habituates it by throwing it upward ten thousand times. Fire too could not be borne downward, nor could anything else that is naturally one way be habituated to be another. Neither by nature, therefore, nor contrary to nature are the virtues present; they are instead present in us who are of such a nature as to receive them, and who are completed through habit.

Further, in the case of those things present in us by nature, we are first provided with the capacities associated with them, then later on display the activities, something that is in fact clear in the case of sense perceptions. For it is not as a result of seeing many times or hearing many times that we came to have those sense perceptions; rather, it is, conversely, because we have them that we use them, and not because we use them that we have them. But the virtues we come to have by engaging in the activities first, as is the case with the arts as well. For as regards those things we must learn how to do, we learn by doing them—for example, by building houses, people become house builders, and by

1 Or, "who are perfected." The same participle (τελειομένοις) may also be taken to be in the middle rather than the passive voice: "and who complete or perfect themselves through habit."
Book 3

CHAPTER ONE

Since virtue concerns passions as well as actions, and voluntary [actions] elicit praise and blame, whereas involuntary ones elicit forgiveness\(^1\) and sometimes even pity, it is perhaps necessary for those who are examining virtue to define the voluntary and the involuntary. Doing so is useful also for lawgivers with a view to both honors and punishments.

Now, things that come about as a result of force or on account of ignorance seem to be involuntary. That which is forced\(^2\) is something whose origin is external, since it is the sort of thing to which the person who is acting or undergoing something contributes nothing—for example, if a wind, or people who have control over someone, should carry him off somewhere.

But as for all that is done on account of fear of greater harm or on account of something noble—for example, if a tyrant should order someone to do something shameful while the tyrant has control over his parents and offspring, and if he should do it, they would be saved, but if not, they would be killed—whether this kind of thing is involuntary or voluntary admits of dispute. Something comparable occurs also when it comes to casting off cargo in storms; for, in an unqualified sense, no one voluntarily jettisons cargo, but when one’s own preservation and that of the rest are at issue, everyone who has sense\(^3\) would do it. These sorts of actions, then, are mixed, though they are more voluntary [than involuntary], for

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1 · We translate the term *sungnômé* in book 3 as “forgiveness,” but as “sympathy” in 6.11 and 7.2, 6, and 7.

2 · The term that Aristotle uses here (*biaios*) has both an active sense—that which is doing the forcing—and, more frequently in the *Ethics*, a passive one—that which is being forced.

3 · Here “sense” translates *nous*, which is elsewhere “intellect.”
Book 4

CHAPTER ONE

Let us speak next in order about liberality. It seems, then, to be a mean with respect to money.¹ For the liberal person is praised not in situations of war or in those in which the moderate person is praised, or, again, in those that involve legal adjudications. Rather, he is praised when it comes to the giving and taking of money, and more with regard to the giving of it. (We mean by money all those things whose worth is measured in legal currency.) Prodigality and stinginess are excesses and deficiencies pertaining to money; and while we always ascribe stinginess to those who are more serious about money than they ought to be, we sometimes assign the term prodigality to a combination of things, for we call prodigal those who lack self-restraint and who, in their licentiousness, spend lavishly. Hence the prodigal are held to be very base people, since they have many vices simultaneously. But in fact they are not appropriately called by this name, because a “prodigal person” means someone who has one vice, namely, ruining his own resources.² For a prodigal person is destroyed by his own doing, since the destruction of one’s own resources seems to be a kind of self-destruction, on the grounds that it is through these resources that one is able to live. We take prodigality, then, in this sense.

Regarding things that have a use, it is possible to use them either well or badly, and wealth belongs among things useful to us. In each case, the person who has the virtue pertaining to a given thing uses it best. Hence he who has the virtue pertaining to money uses wealth best, and this is the

¹ Or, “goods,” “property” (chrēmata), as distinguished from “legal currency” (nomisma).
² “Resources” here translates ousia, a noun derived from the verb to be that can in philosophical contexts be translated as “being.” Hence to destroy one’s “resources” is in a sense to destroy one’s being.
Chapter One

Concerning justice and injustice, we must examine what sort of actions they happen to be concerned with, as well as what sort of mean justice is and of what things the just is a middle term.¹ Let our examination be in accord with the same method of inquiry employed in the matters discussed earlier.

Now, we see that everyone wishes to say that justice is the sort of characteristic on the basis of which people are disposed to do just things and on the basis of which they act justly and wish for just things. It is the same way also concerning injustice—that it is that on the basis of which people are unjust and wish for unjust things. Hence for us too, let these things first be set down as an outline.

What holds in the case of the sciences and capacities does not hold in that of the characteristics: the same capacity or science seems to pertain to opposites,² but a characteristic does not seem to pertain to opposites. For example, as a result of health, one does not do things opposed to one another [—things characteristic of health and those of sickness, for example—], but only what is healthy: we say that it is a healthy walk when one walks as a healthy person would. Many times, then, the one characteristic is known from its opposite; but many times too, the characteristics are known from the things in which they are found. For if the good condition is manifest, then the bad condition too becomes manifest; from what is conducive to it, the good condition becomes manifest, and from this good condition, what is conducive to it also becomes manifest: if the

¹ · Aristotle uses two terms here to refer to justice: dikaiosuné, which we always translate as "justice," and to dikaion, the noun derived from the adjective dikaios, which we variously translate as "the just," "the just thing," or "what is just."
² · Or, "contraries" (ta enantia), here and throughout.
Book 6

CHAPTER ONE

Now, since we happen to have said previously that one ought to choose the middle term—not the excess and not the deficiency—and that the middle term is what correct reason states it to be, let us define this. For in all the characteristics mentioned (just as in the others as well), there is a certain target that he who possesses reason¹ looks to and so tightens or loosens;² and there is a certain defining boundary³ of the middle,⁴ which middle, we assert, is between the excess and the deficiency, since it is in accord with correct reason.

But speaking in this way is, though truthful, not at all clear. For in all the other concerns too about which a science exists, it is true to say that one ought not to strain or slacken either too much or too little, but as accords with the mean and as correct reason states. Yet if somebody should possess this alone, he would be no further ahead in his knowledge—for example, he would not know what sorts of things ought to be applied to the body if somebody should say, "so many things as the art of medicine commands and as he who possesses that art commands." Hence in the case of the characteristics of the soul too, not only ought this to be stated truly, but what correct reason is must also be defined, that is, what its defining boundary is.

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¹ Literally "the reason," which may refer to "correct reason."
² As Burnet notes, "Here the metaphor changes from 'hitting the mark' to 'tuning a lyre.'"
³ This phrase translates a single word, horos, whose first meaning is simply a stone or other marker indicating a boundary line.
⁴ Plural in the Greek.
Book 7

CHAPTER ONE

After these considerations, we must make another beginning and say that there are three forms of things pertaining to character that must be avoided: vice, lack of self-restraint, and brutishness.¹ The contraries of two of these are clear: the one contrary we call virtue, the other self-restraint. But as for the contrary of brutishness, it would be especially fitting to speak of the virtue that is beyond us, a certain heroic and divine virtue—just as Homer has written, when Priam says about Hector that he was exceedingly good, “and he did not seem to be a child of any mortal man, but of a god.”² As a result, if (as people assert) human beings become gods through an excess of virtue, it is clear that something of this sort would be the characteristic opposite to brutishness. For just as a brute animal has neither vice nor virtue, so also a god does not either; rather, the characteristic belonging to a god is more honorable than virtue and that belonging to a brute animal is of some genus other than vice. And since it is rare for a man to be divine—just as the Laconians³ are accustomed to addressing someone, when they greatly admire him, as “a divine man,”⁴ they assert—so also the brutish person is rare among human beings, he being present among barbarians especially, though some cases also arise through both diseases and defects. And such is the bad name, “brutish,” we give to those human beings who exceed the rest in vice. But some men-

¹ Or, “savagery.” The term (thēriotēs) is related to the word elsewhere translated as “beast” or “brute animal” (thērion).
² Homer, Iliad 24.258.
³ That is, the Spartans.
⁴ Aristotle’s quotation contains the Laconian variant of the word for “divine” (seios instead of theios). Consider also Plato, Meno 99d7–9 and Laws 626c4–5.