12-1976

Moral Perfection: An Interpretation of the Nicomachean Ethics

Stephen Foster
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/masters_theses

Part of the Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/masters_theses/2319
MORAL PERFECTION: AN INTERPRETATION OF THE NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

by

Stephen Foster

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the Degree of Master of Arts

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
December 1976
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank Dr. Joseph Ellin, Dr. Otto Grundler and Dr. John Sommerfeldt for their time and assistance. Special thanks to two old friends, Charla and Fred, who did much to make this possible.

Stephen Foster
INFORMATION TO USERS

This material was produced from a microfilm copy of the original document. While the most advanced technological means to photograph and reproduce this document have been used, the quality is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original submitted.

The following explanation of techniques is provided to help you understand markings or patterns which may appear on this reproduction.

1. The sign or “target” for pages apparently lacking from the document photographed is “Missing Page(s)”. If it was possible to obtain the missing page(s) or section, they are spliced into the film along with adjacent pages. This may have necessitated cutting thru an image and duplicating adjacent pages to insure you complete continuity.

2. When an image on the film is obliterated with a large round black mark, it is an indication that the photographer suspected that the copy may have moved during exposure and thus cause a blurred image. You will find a good image of the page in the adjacent frame.

3. When a map, drawing or chart, etc., was part of the material being photographed the photographer followed a definite method in “sectioning” the material. It is customary to begin photoing at the upper left hand corner of a large sheet and to continue photoing from left to right in equal sections with a small overlap. If necessary, sectioning is continued again — beginning below the first row and continuing on until complete.

4. The majority of users indicate that the textual content is of greatest value, however, a somewhat higher quality reproduction could be made from “photographs” if essential to the understanding of the dissertation. Silver prints of “photographs” may be ordered at additional charge by writing the Order Department, giving the catalog number, title, author and specific pages you wish reproduced.

5. PLEASE NOTE: Some pages may have indistinct print. Filmed as received.

University Microfilms International
300 North Zeib Road
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106 USA
St. John's Road, Tyler's Green
High Wycombe, Bucks, England HP10 8HR

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
FOSTER, Stephen Paul
MORAL PERFECTION: AN INTERPRETATION
OF THE NICOMACHEAN ETHICS.
Western Michigan University, M.A., 1976
Philosophy

Xerox University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I METHODOLOGY IN THE NICOMACHEAN ETHICS</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II TELEOLOGY AND DEONTOLOGY</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

This thesis will constitute an examination of Aristotle's ethical philosophy with the specific purpose of determining the extent to which Aristotle conceived moral phenomena as a perfecting element of the human personality. The treatment will deal largely with two comprehensive ethical theories; the teleological and the deontological, which when interpreted from the Aristotelean text, shed light on his conception of moral value and its status within the whole of human social values.

What bearing do the theories of teleology and deontology have on the concept of moral perfection? Each theory presents a significantly different moral paradigm. In a deontological ethic the fully moral individual is one who has thoroughly developed a sense of duty, an ability to recognize and a disposition to fulfill obligations. The consumate teleological man is one who is able to determine and pursue certain ultimate human values. In the deontological paradigm the preoccupation is with the disparity between inclination and obligation. In the teleological paradigm the essential problem is to determine which human values are most worth pursuing and in what manner they should be pursued. The point should be made that for Aristotle, moral perfection is not the same as human perfection. Moral perfection is one type of perfection, but morality is one of several important aspects of experiences which demands attention and cultivation.
There are a number of reasons why I believe it is worthwhile to pursue this study. First, there is an obvious intrinsic value in ethical concerns. Second, Aristotle treats the subject in a remarkably distinctive and highly systematic fashion which exposes a number of paradoxical and troublesome elements. These elements constitute perennial problems encountered in the study of ethics. In addition, the precise manner in which these difficulties arise enable a study to ascertain the relevant strengths and weaknesses of Aristotle as an ethical theorist.

Central to the theme of moral perfection is the fundamental naturalism which shapes the conceptual and methodological character of Aristotle's ethical writings. By ethical naturalism, I mean that all ethical phenomena are perceived as being caused by identifiable physical, psychological and sociological forces. Aristotle conceives human society to be the result of a natural inclination to associate and that all such associations presuppose arrangements and practices that would be characterized as ethical. This naturalistic concept leads Aristotle to approach the subject matter in a way which establishes ethical philosophizing as distinct from a metaphysical a priorism. Morality, for Aristotle, is and has been an existing feature of human society. Any attempt to formulate a theory about this subject must first start with an examination of actual human society and construct a theory which is consistent with the evidence.
What, it may be asked, is the relationship between perfectionism and naturalism? If human association is natural, if community is the source of ethical values then moral perfection is possible. As I stated above, deontology and teleology present contrasting moral paradigms, and I believe these two theories are very useful concepts in an evaluation of moral perfection. Kant's moral philosophy represents a pure deontological ethic. In an article entitled "The Kantian Critique of Aristotle's Moral Philosophy: An Appraisal" Roger Sullivan compares Kant's best moral man with Aristotle's. "Kant's best moral man is Aristotle's second best."¹ Sullivan suggests that the moral ideals of each thinker differ significantly. There is a theological implication here. What is suggested is that because Kant's view of man is Christian he sees less possible perfection for him in his present existence. "Kant's best man is Aristotle's second best man because Aristotle affirms what Kant denies, that moral consciousness and appetition can achieve a state of rational harmony in this life."² The point is that the teleological ethical theory as developed by Aristotle is dependent upon a naturalistic view of morality


²loc. cit., p. 51.
that man's desires and inclinations can be brought to conform with his consciousness of what is right. But further, and this is the thesis I wish to develop, although Aristotle's conceptual framework is basically teleological, he is aware of the concept of obligation, an awareness which is manifested by deonotological elements in his ethical writings. The common opinion that Greek ethics had no concept of responsibility is, I believe, a moot one. "That axiology flourished among the Greeks is shown by the frequently uttered but untrue complaint that they had no concept corresponding to the modern notion of obligation."4

I hope to demonstrate that Aristotle does provide the possibility of intrinsic moral value as embodied in the ideal practical man, the Statesman. Yet, as a note of caution, it should be emphasized that the deonotological implications are indeed just that, implications, and there is no fully developed deontological theory. The recognition of this fact rests with the understanding of the limits of Classical Greek ethical theory. Alasdair MacIntyre in his A Short History of Ethics points to the limitation in this way:


In general, Greek ethics asks, What am I to do if I am to fare well? Modern ethics asks, what am I to do if I am to do right? and it asks this question in such a way that doing right is made something quite independent of faring well.5

This modern separation of "faring well" and "doing right" explains why Kant's best man is Aristotle's second best man. The fact that Aristotle did not make this separation accounts for his construction of faring well as being moral.

Is there any way for an ethical theorist to completely avoid the problem of moral obligation? The fact that Aristotle has been both criticized and defended by modern thinkers from Kant on, suggests that his ethical views must somehow at least recognize the problem which I believe he indeed does.

I intend to develop the proposed thesis in two chapters. I will concentrate principally on the Nicomachean Ethics, although I will refer some to the Politics and the Metaphysics of Aristotle.

The first chapter will examine the method employed by Aristotle. A methodological analysis is significant to the central theme because it can help to disclose philosophically distinctive features which constitute the framework of his conception. In his Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle performs two distinct kinds of operations. In one kind of operation he establishes normative principles for action. In order for character and

moral action to come into being certain objectives and necessary conditions must be established and sustained. In the second, he examines the presuppositions for those claims. It is by this kind of critical procedure that Aristotle gives definition to moral philosophy, establishes its limits and aims, prescribes a well defined method and delineates the relation of ethics to the whole of philosophy. Thus in the *Nicomachean Ethics* there is a combination of normative and critical elements which serve both a practical and theoretical purpose.

What then, should an examination of the employed method yield? The method of establishing ethical norms should indicate for one, their epistemological status. Their limitations and dimensions would be determined by the extent to which they can claim a certainty of being known. Furthermore, examining the manner in which these values are constructed, how they are related and/or derived from one another helps to disclose their hierarchical structure and determine principles of relative value as well as the relationship of moral values to the other aspects of human experience. To take an example, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that the self indulgent man is worse than the incontinent man. What are his grounds for making this

---

\(^6\)N.E. 1150a 31. All references from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, unless otherwise indicated, will be taken from the W. D. Ross translation, *The Works of Aristotle*, translated into English under the editorship of W. D. Ross (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1908–1952) 12 Volumes, and will take the above standard citation form. References to other Aristotelean works will be taken from this Ross edited work and will use standard citation form and cite the translator of the specific work.
evaluation? The incontinent man is overcome by powerful appetites. The self indulgent man has acted by reason of choice. Thus, "choice" is the key term for evaluative consideration. Why choice? Because choice is deliberate and voluntary, and voluntary wrongful acts are worse than involuntary wrongful acts. Thus a voluntary act has a greater relative value than an involuntary. But why is this so? It is because voluntary actions identify the agent as responsible and hence indicate a certain quality of character. Character is, for Aristotle, the result of habituation. In the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* he says:

> Hence anyone who is to listen to lectures about what is noble and just and, generally, about the subjects of political science must have been brought up in good habits. For the fact is the starting-point, and if this is sufficiently plain to him, he will not at the start need the reason as well; and the man who has been well brought up has or can easily get starting points.7

Now these remarks indicate that Aristotle equates moral development with a certain kind of educational practice. One can be in a position to understand ethical concepts only after practicing them to the extent that they become a part of the character. The practices of morality must be temporally prior to any attempt to understand it. If one is "to listen intelligently to lectures about what is noble and just" one

7*N.E.* 1095 b 5-10.
must have first undergone personal acquaintance with ethical practices. Thus the duty of the ethical philosopher is first to identify actual existing practices, to proceed empirically ("for the fact is the starting point") and to interpret these practices in an educational context, that is, to consider their transmission to others as preconditions for further moral instruction.

The second chapter will deal with the character of the ethical norms themselves. More precisely, what justification does Aristotle offer for his system of value? Aristotle's system is generally interpreted as being a teleological one. Indeed, his terminology throughout the Nicomachean Ethics is decidedly teleological. A teleologically based ethic holds that the moral worth of an act must be evaluated by its consequences. Thus, for any act to have moral value it must somehow bring about some desired good. In his ethical writings Aristotle elaborately defines a good designated as "happiness" to be the ultimate good for which human beings strive. Very generally speaking then, the sphere of morality lies within activities which tend to make people happy.

At this point I think it is important to raise the issue of the deontological aspects of Aristotle's theory. As stated above, ethical formalism or deontology, has its purest advocacy

---

in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

If any action is to be morally good, it is not enough that it should conform to the moral law—it must also be done for the sake of the moral law; where this is not so, the conformity is only too contingent and precarious since the non-moral ground at work will now and then produce actions which transgress it.\(^9\)

Kant's conception of moral value lies in what appears to be a formulation which is antithetical to Aristotle's. The distinction is set in terms of the intrinsic and extrinsic value of moral acts. In a strict teleological theory such as that attributed to Aristotle, the moral worth of an act is equatable with the possibility for producing an external good. For Kant, an act is of moral value if and only if it is done from a purity of motive for the law of morality itself. In other words, the consequences of an act are not relevant for purely moral considerations.

There are, however, significant deontological elements and implications in Aristotle's theory. Furthermore, these elements and implications qualify and to a certain extent complicate the intended position of morality in human affairs which Aristotle attempts to establish. This is not to say, however, that Aristotle is a deontologist in the sense that Kant is. Kant's position is an extreme deontological one in which the concepts of inclination

---

\(^9\)Immanuel Kant, "Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals" in The Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy, translated and edited by Lewis White Beck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), pg. 57. All following references to Kant's works will be taken from this edition.
and obligation are opposed. I am claiming that Aristotle is a
deontologist only in the sense that he denies morality a purely
instrumental role in the attainment of the good life and recognizes
that moral virtue contains an intrinsic value.

The complication is most conspicuous in Book X, the final
book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In this book Aristotle states
in what activity he believes the good for man to consist.

Happiness extends, then, just so far as con­
templation does and those to whom contemplation
more fully belongs are more truely happy, not
as a mere concomitant but in virtue of the
contemplation for this is in itself precious.
Happiness, therefore must be some sort of
contemplation.\textsuperscript{10}

Contemplation is an occupation distinct from practical kinds of
activities. It involves the agent alone, using a purely theoret­
ical reasoning capacity, whereas practical pursuits involve
political, social and artistic activities. "Now the activity
of the practical virtues is exhibited in political or military
affairs."\textsuperscript{11} Moral action is, for Aristotle, a practical concern
as it deals with the realization of established goods. "Practical
wisdom, then, must be a reasoned and true state of capacity to
act with regard to human goods."\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10}N.E. 1178b 25-30.
\textsuperscript{11}N.E. 1177b 5.
\textsuperscript{12}N.E. 1104b 20.
The highest form of human occupation is an apolitical, amoral one which is exclusively concerned with intellectual objects. So, in terms of perfection, active intellectual pursuit is the aim.

What then is the relationship of moral activity to the sphere of intellectual activity? Aristotle might be interpreted as saying that ethics serves only as a propaedeutic science, an exercise in forming the human disposition so that intellectual goals may become attainable.

There are crucial implications that follow from such an interpretation. Moral accomplishment or perfection is excluded from and subordinate to intellectual perfection. Thus, it would be plausible to infer a dualistic concept of human nature. Aristotle tells us in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that: "moral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains, it is on account of the pleasure that we do bad things and on account of the pain that we abstain from noble ones."\(^\text{13}\) Pleasure and pain are the primary forces that shape the human character. In order, then, for one to develop a good character, one must submit to a process which administers the distribution of pleasure and pain in the proper manner. "Hence we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought, for this

\(^{13}\text{N.E. 1104b 5-10.}\)
is the right education."\(^{14}\)

Theoretical education, on the other hand, employs a different method which produces more immediate results. "What has been said is confirmed by the fact that while young men become geometricians and mathematicians and wise in matters like these, it is thought that a young man of practical wisdom cannot be found."\(^{15}\) Theoretical enterprises operate from abstract universal principles which, due to their character of necessity, are intuitively grasped and immediately employed.

Morality requires time. It requires patience. Practical matters are always contingent in character. There are almost limitless possibilities, divergencies and exceptions. Thus, there is a need for a substantial amount of experience in order for one to know general principles of action and to formulate a consistent character. Theory deals with that which is necessary. It is, in a sense, timeless and immediately available to an intellect properly trained to comprehend.

The practical-theoretical distinction suggests the above proposed duality in the following manner. Morality conditions the animality of the human being. Theoretical contemplation is the condition of the spirituality of the human being. Aristotle draws an analogy between matters of morality and matters of health. "Matters concerned with conduct and questions of what

\(^{14}\)N.E. 1104b 10-15.

\(^{15}\)N.E. 1142a 14.
is good for us have no fixity, any more than matters of health... it is the nature of such things (both health and character) to be destroyed by defect and excess. The purpose of establishing a moral character is to enable one to develop a disposition to act preservingly, to avoid the debilitating and destructive consequences that result from overattentience to pleasurable activities or a shrinking from potentially promising painful activities. Man shares with all other animals appetities which are both self and species serving. The appetities of animals other than humans are dictated by instincts. Human appetities must be shaped by reasonable moderate habits. Habits achieve for man what instincts do for other animals. That man can cultivate habits is due to his unique nature as a reasoning animal. Reason is the instrumental force which determines the means by which well being is secured. Productive habits are determined so, ultimately, by the standard of rationality. If, as Aristotle asserts, rationality is what defines man then the irrational appetitive side of human nature must always be subordinate to the demands of reason. Morality, thus, involves a rational determination of the appetative faculty. Rational principles of action are derived from experience. The kind of reasoning involved in moral experience is of a practical nature, and Aristotle is insistent on making a clear and hard distinction between practical reason

---

16N.E. 1104a 5-15.
and theoretical reason. Moral excellence requires a perfection of the former. The morally perfect man is a practical man, a man of action.

Theoretical knowledge, the object of contemplation, is by its nature exclusive of objects or relations which are contingent and particular. This pure reasoning activity for Aristotle constitutes the ultimate good of happiness. The contemplative ideal is apolitical. The man of action, the political man, the embodiment of practical reason, and the philosopher, the embodiment of theoretical ideal, represent two distinct and seemingly unreconcilable paradigms. But nevertheless both are essential figures of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The fact that both figures are essential to Aristotle suggests that he sees the ideal of contemplation to be very limited in its possibilities for attainment.

But such a life [one of contemplation] would be too high for a man, for it is not in so far as he is a man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him: and by so much as this is superior to our composite nature is its activity superior to that which is the exercise of the other kind of virtue.17

Aristotle postulates contemplation as the highest form of human achievement yet insists that it is beyond strictly human capacities. Because of its divine character it transcends the political-ethical sphere. Consequently the Statesman is, for Aristotle,

17*N.E.* 1177b 25-30.
the ethical ideal. It is the Statesman that deals with composite 
nature of man, the composite of animality and rationality.

Now if "Aristotle's account of morality is a pure theory of 
prudential action,"18 (and this is the charge made against 
Aristotle by Kantian deontologists), then there is no possibility 
for moral autonomy. But this is not the case. Aristotle does 
postulate that some acts are worth doing for their own sake. 
For example in his discussion of the particular virtue of courage 
he says: "But one ought to be brave not under compulsion but 
because it is noble to be so."19 Here is a deontological side 
to Aristotle's ethics. "We can say that a theory is deontological 
if and only if according to it some act is worth doing for its 
own sake."20 The fact that Aristotle insists upon an intrinsic 
value for good acts, that he perceives the good to be noble in 
his own right is strong evidence for an Aristotelean notion of 
moral autonomy.

Thus there emerges from Aristotle's ethics a tension which 
can be presented in deontological-practical, teleological-
contemplative terms. The former presents an ideal of moral 
action, the latter, contemplative happiness. Happiness ultimately 
lies in contemplation, and, consequently, the moral activity of 
the statesman becomes a separate end, valued in itself.

18Sullivan, op. cit., p. 25.
19N.E. 1116b 1.
20Bernard Baurim, "Aristotle's Ethical Intuitionsim", The 
New Scholasticism, XLII (Winter, 1968), 5.
CHAPTER I

METHODOLOGY IN THE NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

The following chapter will concentrate principally on the first book of the Nicomachean Ethics. The question arises, why and why only, Book I? There is the obvious answer of limitations of length and time. Also the very structure of the Nicomachean Ethics permits an analysis which would be helpful in understanding what kind of ethical system Aristotle was attempting to establish.

Book I is of utmost importance for several reasons. First, Aristotle begins the Nicomachean Ethics by attempting to define the nature of the "good." This is the central but by no means only crucial thrust of Book I. With the exception of the concluding lines of the tenth and final book, Book I is the only book that deals essentially with defining what the good is for man. Books II through IX deal in an almost casuistic manner with more specific aspects of ethical phenomena. While Book I attempts a definition of the ultimate human good, books II through VI define, both generally and specifically, virtue as a means to the good. The remainder of the treatise deals with various aspects of moral relevance such as continence, incontinence, pleasure and friendship. So, in a word, Aristotle's procedure is to provide a brief general conception of what human good is and then at great length describe the process and intricacies of its acquisition.

16

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
In addition to his efforts to define the good, Aristotle, in Book I, takes great pains to set down a well justified methodological procedure. The very nature of the good limits and defines the procedure by which we understand and practice good. This methodological instruction is most crucial because by it Aristotle pronounces and reveals the radical distinction between the theoretical and the practical, the intellect and the will. In making such a distinction, Aristotle repudiates the Platonic Metaphysics of Forms which makes "Good" an object of knowledge but makes difficult its treatment in the concrete. This problem will be discussed at greater length later.

This first book is a sketchy but complete treatise on the nature of the good. However, it also contains all seminal ideas necessary for developing a full ethical system and it states their relevance and potential either tacitly or by full implication. For example, in his introductory remarks Aristotle demonstrates what he believes to be a most obvious truth: that all human actions and pursuits aim at some end or good. However, he immediately qualifies this by adding that there are real differences to be found in ends or goods. The fundamental principle Aristotle is trying to establish is that all intelligent action is purposive. It is the purpose that gives the act value. Now if various actions are defined by the purpose for which they are undertaken, then it becomes important, since there is an endless variety of possible action, to determine a proper course
of action, in a word, choice. Implicit here is the ethical concept of choice which is later fully developed.

Also early in this first book Aristotle concludes that it is the discipline of politics which treats the good for man.\(^{21}\)

Why politics? Because in part, it is the answer to the problem of value. Value is introduced and assumed to be the purpose or reason for the completion of any kind of action. From this follows another important distinction, that of subordinate value. One value is subordinate to another if the action which is undertaken is done to advance the accomplishments of an activity which on completion entails greater complexity. So value is in part a matter of complexity. Now politics, as the discipline dealing with the good, is proved to be so by two different kinds of justification. The first, from the basis of value lying in the complex the most complex discipline which dictates action is that of politics. Subordinate to the discipline of politics are other important action directing disciplines such as rhetoric, economics, strategy, etc., which are used by and subordinate to politics. The second justification is an appeal to the facts of society, that is, it is the politician who coordinates and directs all activities in society which are conducive to the effective operation of the society. It is no accident that Aristotle establishes early and effectively that politics is a

\(^{21}\text{N.E. 1094b 10.}\)
hierarchic discipline. In so doing he helps portray the significant relation between the ethical man and the political order which must exist in order for that man to come into being.

Also mentioned, but deferred for later treatment, is the Aristotelean concept of virtue. The concept of virtue is introduced at a point where Aristotle is attempting to add substantially to the concept of happiness.\(^{22}\) His point is that in order to fully understand the most important human achievement, happiness, it is essential to determine a function or activity which is peculiarly human and hence embraces what is genuinely human. Of course, what Aristotle considers uniquely human is the propensity to reason. He says that "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."\(^{23}\) Developing this reasoning capacity and incorporating it into action is what comprises the nature of virtue. Thus virtue has an instrumental role in the facilitation of man's proper function.

In this first book we have important elements of completion and promise. The good for man is happiness and is justified by its complexity and finality. That is, happiness is the good for man because it is the reason for which he performs all conscious activities. But in order to be happy he must perform all of

\(^{22}\)N.E. 1098a 1-20.

\(^{23}\)N.E. 1098a 15-20.
his actions in a manner which is compatible and consistent with his nature of being human, namely a manner which is characterized by rationality. So in the first book there are two complete and defended doctrines. The first is the metaphysically based doctrine of teleology, which essentially asserts that all activity, particularly human activity, is essentially purposeful. The second is the metaphysically based doctrine of species which assigns a similarity of design and or function to naturally similar things—and hence human nature comes to be explained in terms of a rational function. Added to these notions are implications and distinctions that are essential to the development of an objective ethical system. Establishing intelligent action as the basis for human happiness still leaves many ambiguous areas of consideration such as how does one become disposed toward intelligent acts (the problem of virtue), or when is one responsible for his action (the problem of choice and compulsion). Aristotle is also aware of the non-rational forces that effect the human condition such as pleasure and the effect and bearing they have on moral experience.

Finally one must look to this first book to understand how Aristotle fits in the ethical-political aspects of man with the totality of his experience. It is the display of method in this book which clearly indicates what activity Aristotle believed to be moral philosophizing and its essential difference from natural philosophizing. It is from this proposal of method that we grasp both the expectations and limitations of what we can
know about how to act. We can see both what Aristotle thinks morality should be and what moral philosophy in perspective should be.

In analyzing the Nicomachean Ethics, Book I, it is profitable to first follow the general progression of argument throughout while concentrating on the various facets of argument. There are four basic claims put forth in Book I:

1. All activities have an end or good (1094a 1-15).
2. There is one final end or good for man (1094a 15-25).
3. Man's end or good is happiness (1095a 10-20).
4. Happiness is the result of a virtuous life (1098a 10-20).

What is Aristotle's justification for making these claims? There is the first claim: "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."24 Now here Aristotle makes several qualifications. There is the above mentioned concept of value subordinated by the principle of complexity of end. There is another distinction made here. "Where there are ends apart from the actions, it is the nature of the products to be better than the activities."25 This is a distinction that establishes an essential difference between the question of value when applied to product (art) and the question of value when applied to

24 N.E. 1094a 1-5.
25 N.E. 1094a 5-7.
activities appraised in their own right (morality). Thus there are two aspects of human experience, art and morality, which are judged by two different standards. One final point in this regard is established thus by Aristotle.

In all of these [the various disciplines] 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 end of the actions, or something else apart from the activities.26

The principle of subordinate value takes precedent when various arts or disciplines are involved in the accomplishment of a higher more complex enterprise. If a variety of subordinate values are situated in a value subordinate to a higher activity, then the subordinate values, regardless of whether they are productive activities which are valued in their own right, are lesser in relative value.

From this characterization of human acts follows the second essential step.

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.27

---

26N.E. 1094a 12-17.

27N.E. 1094a 18-21.
The justification for this claim is two fold: it is primarily a matter of logic, that is, for anything to have meaning it must in some way be conclusive. An infinite series is intellectually useless or trite because there is no way it can be apprehended or evaluated. The lack of an ultimate goal or end in itself, would subject the entirety of human desire to an unintelligible and meaningless series. Moreover, experience seems to confirm the notion that all our desires are not empty and vain. At least men generally do not act as if that were the case, as they exhibit care and prudence in carrying out fulfillment of desires.

The third step involves defining the good as happiness. However, Aristotle admits that this adds nothing immediately substantial to the treatment.

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 men and people of superior refinement say that is 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.28

The problem of defining "the good" becomes the problem of defining happiness. Now the terms "good" and "happiness" are equivocal. Aristotle is careful to mention that he is

28N.E. 1095a 15-20.
discussing goods "achievable by action." The problem of "good,"
generically considered and particularly applied, is one which
requires for Aristotle a critical examination of Plato's doctrine
of Forms. The analysis of this examination will be taken up
later. Aristotle's mention of the differing accounts of happiness
is a prefatory remark which will provide a basis from which to
further his investigation into the nature of happiness. Aristotle
wishes to draw conclusions from common and reasonable opinion.
He sees the substance of definition there. By extracting the
factual, the demonstrable, from the various opinions one can
draw reasonably certain conclusions about the subject matter.

We must consider it [happiness] however in the
light not only of our conclusion and premises,
but also of what is commonly said about it; for
with a true view all the data harmonize, but
with a false one the facts soon clash.29

Utilizing this method Aristotle surveys commonly expressed
opinions about the nature of happiness which enables him to
significantly qualify the notion. He rejects the view advanced
by the common man that happiness is equatable with pleasure on
the ground that pleasure seeking engages only the lowest
capacities, capacities which are common with beasts as well
as man.30

29N.E. 1098b 15-25.

30N.E. 1095b 15-25.
Aristotle also rejects an identification of happiness with political honor which he considers much too vulnerable and elusive to be established as the chief human good.\textsuperscript{31}

He also considers a life of virtue as the constitution of happiness and suggest that it may be superior to political honor but concludes that virtue as happiness will not equate because the possession may be construed passively so that one might be virtuous but inactive, unfortunate and miserable.\textsuperscript{32}

Thus one can say certain things about the nature of happiness. — It is not completely identifiable with pleasure, political honor or virtue. Each of these have severe limitations which make them incompatible happiness as the final good.

What Aristotle does, to take us to the fourth major claim, is, after examining the various opinions about happiness and measuring them by the concept of good as an essential and final human activity, to return to the first two claims that every activity has an end and the end for which we do all our actions is the final end or good achievable by action. The chief good has complete finality. Does happiness have this character of finality? Some pursuits are undertaken for their own sake yet have a reference to another activity. But happiness is uniquely final, it is never pursued for any other reason than its own sake.

\textsuperscript{31}N.E. 1095b 25-27.

\textsuperscript{32}N.E. 1095b 30-35.
Aristotle now adds one more qualification to the concept of happiness. Happiness carries a certain degree of self-sufficiency which is perhaps most obvious.\textsuperscript{33} The consequences of dependency are fortuity and vulnerability. If happiness is the result of one's own activity its acquisition is designed and commanded with the means internally located rather than externally poised.

From this treatment of the concept of happiness a number of facets are illuminated. We know what it is not. We also know that happiness, \textit{eudaemonia}, "is something final and self-sufficient and is the end of action."\textsuperscript{34}

With this general concept of happiness Aristotle makes the fourth and final basic claim of Book I.

We state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or action of the soul implying a rational principle.... Human good turns out to be an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue.\textsuperscript{35}

However, Aristotle is dissatisfied with his general outline of happiness.

Presumably 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 man.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{N.E.} 1097b 7-20.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{N.E.} 1097b 21.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{N.E.} 1098a 10-20.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{N.E.} 1097b 22-25.
Aristotle does not ask if man has a function. He assumes its existence and raises the question of what it is. Why does Aristotle believe that man has a function? This belief is rooted in Aristotle's hylomorphic philosophy of nature and in his theory of causality. All natural entities are the composed result of matter (the undifferentiated substance that makes up things) and form (that which differentiates or specifies an object giving it an identity as a certain kind of object). Matter and form are two of the four constitutive causes. The other two are efficient cause, that external element or impetus which acts to bring about change, and final cause, the reason for which anything happens or takes place.37

If we look at man with this theory in mind it is easy to see why Aristotle believes that man has a function. First of all it is important to note that "man" is more than a convenient linguistic term to designate creatures which possess a certain similarity; Aristotle is no nominalist. "Man" is the term we must use to refer to creatures who possess and display reason. The material cause of a man is the physical substance out of which he is composed. His formal cause (that essence or principle which differentiates him from all material things) is that he can reason. His efficient causes are the coital and natal events which bring him into existence. The final cause of a man is that reason for which he lives. The proof for final cause has already

been cited (see above, p. 23). A denial of finality renders human desires and the actions to fulfill those desires wholly arbitrary and lacking in any ultimate justification.

Thus when Aristotle says that it might be better to understand what happiness means by determining the function of man he is proceeding from his metaphysically based notions of formal and final causality. It is reason which defines him as a man. Thus rationality which is the specifying cause of a man becomes by exercise the final cause of his existence. If reason is the essential unique constitutional element of manhood then there is an obligation to exercise it in order to be fully human. Man's function or purpose is rational exercise. So finally Aristotle presents a precise conclusive definition of happiness. Happiness is the cultivation and practice of reason.

A problem does arise here with respect to the claim that Aristotle is an ethical naturalist. It appears from what was outlined directly above, that morality is ultimately based upon the metaphysically based doctrine of species from which is derived the concept of a unique human function. Does the fact that Aristotle derives a conception of a fixed human nature from metaphysically based doctrines negate the claim that he is an ethical naturalist? I do not believe so. For Aristotle the end of ethical activity is action. What is sought is not a theoretical knowledge of what good is but the actuality of persons...
with good characters. His method for achieving this end is practical and empirical. One becomes virtuous by means of education, an education which is founded upon a wide range of social experience. Thus the possibility of moral perfection lies within social institutions. But what is the relation between the natural morality of social institutions and the metaphysically based doctrine of species? Harry Jaffa in his book, *Thomism and Aristotelianism*, sees the existence of natural morality as a legitimate derivation from the metaphysical doctrine.

First there is the assumption as to the existence of a "natural morality." This assumption is, indeed, a legitimate inference from the Aristotelian doctrine and follows necessarily from the Aristotelian doctrine of species. If each species is one, and is properly defined by its form, which is its perfection, then each individual of the species attains its proper "good" in the realization of this perfection....Moral perfection is the perfection and application of reason in the sphere of action.  

Jaffa goes on to make the point that one can quite legitimately question the truth of the metaphysical doctrine of species and to doubt the truth of the practical doctrine which is derived from it. Therefore, a rejection of Aristotle's metaphysical theories would entail a rejection of his practical

---

38 *N.E.* 1103b 30.

theories. But Jaffa's final point with respect to this matter is that the truth or falsity of Aristotle's doctrine of species is not important in terms of the practical consequences.

The need for moral certainty exists and will continue to exist whether a metaphysical foundation for it can be found or not....There is no apriori knowledge of the premises from which a practical doctrine of human nature would have to be inferred; for the premises from which a sufficient knowledge of morality would have to be inferred are, as Aristotle repeatedly says, a knowledge of the particular moral facts.\textsuperscript{40}

The point is that Aristotle's ethical theory can be considered naturalistic from both a methodological and an epistemological view even though it has a metaphysical foundation.

This, as far as basic argument, is the major progression of Book I. The rest of Book I involves more testing of his claims by appeal to, and examination of, credible opinion and a preliminary treatment of virtue (taken up and developed both in general and in particular for the next four books) Which is Aristotle's means for developing rational disposition in order to make happiness attainable. What Aristotle has done is to quickly raise and quickly settle the problem of what "good" is. The bulk of the remaining treatise devoted to how the good is brought into being.

The good, happiness, is defined by Aristotle strictly in intellectual terms, that is to say, happiness lies in the

\textsuperscript{40}Ibid.
cultivation of rationality. In Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, his description of happiness is more explicit than in Book I. He shows that happiness in its purest form is an activity of philosophic contemplation and that contemplation above all depends upon leisure. He adds that politics is an unleisurely activity and that the Statesman is an unleisurely fellow. In effect, Aristotle makes happiness a good that wholly transcends the moral-political sphere. In Book I Aristotle gives a short and adumbrative treatment of what the good is and the remaining books of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are devoted to a large extent to an examination of the nature of virtue, particularly practical virtue. This fact is, I believe, a strong indication of Aristotle's concern with two separate ideals, the contemplative and the practical. In Books I and X he defines contemplation as the end for man, but also in Book I he takes great effort to make a methodological distinction. It is this distinction that reveals his concern for practical ideals and suggests that his lengthy treatment of the nature of virtue is a recognition of the value of practical excellence and of the empirical nature of its study.

Moral philosophy employs a substantially different method than natural philosophy. The opening sentence of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is: "Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit is thought to aim at some good."41 He

41*N.E.* 1094a 1.
immediately qualifies: "But a certain difference is to be found among ends." Various activities and disciplines can be distinguished and differentiated in part by determining what they are intended to do. What then is the end or purpose of moral philosophy? Aristotle says: "The end aimed at is not knowledge but action." This is why the discipline which is assigned to the study of the end or good for which we do all our actions is politics. The purpose intended is a formation of good citizens rather than an abstracted knowledge of what good is.

Various disciplines can also be distinguished by what degrees of exactitude the subject matter will yield.

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

So before one sets forth into any inquiry one must know what he can look for and what he should demand. "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."

What Aristotle does here is to distinguish between disciplines which measure and judge ideas and those which determine

---

\(^{42}\text{N.E. 1094a 4.}\)

\(^{43}\text{N.E. 1094a 4.}\)

\(^{44}\text{N.E. 1094b 12-14.}\)

\(^{45}\text{N.E. 1094b 25-27.}\)
and measure human actions. The subject matter with which political science is concerned is inexact.

Now fine and just acts 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.\textsuperscript{46}

It is obviously not easy to give an exact definition of nobility and justice. Moreover, material goods have no exact or universally beneficial effect upon men.

And goods also give rise to a similar fluctuation because they bring harm to many people; for before now men have been undone by reason of their wealth.\textsuperscript{47}

Aristotle is here establishing the justification and necessity for the use of a particular method. Disciplines are distinguished by differences in ends and in the degree of exactitude the subject matter will yield. The discipline of politics aims at action for its end and admits of considerable variety in its principles and conclusions. Thus, the kind of method employed by this discipline is somewhat limited.

We must be content, then in speaking of such subjects [political subjects] and with such premises to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and 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.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{46}N.E. 1094b 15-17.

\textsuperscript{47}N.E. 1094b 18-20.

\textsuperscript{48}N.E. 1094b 20-24.
The discipline of politics takes on a constitution which is general, qualified and adumbrative.

Aristotle further exposes his method by stating that in order to study politics one must possess a certain type of character. This, of course, is entirely consistent with the established aim of politics as action. Action must arise out of character and this is why he takes pains to describe what kind of student the discipline of politics requires. Right action requires not only intellectual analysis but also a disposition which is rightfully inclined. Intellectual apprehension without the resolved character is useless.

Hence a young man is not a proper hearer of lectures in political science. It makes no difference whether he is young in years or youthful in character; the defect does not depend on time but on his living and pursuing each successive object as passion directs. For to such persons, as to the incontinent, knowledge brings no profit. 49

Theoretical knowledge requires only an intellectual grasp. Knowledge leading to action is a different matter. Aristotle gleans this distinction by pointing to the epistemological differences. "While we must begin with what is known, things are objects of knowledge in two senses—some to us, some without qualification." 50

49 N.E. 1095a 3-10.

50 N.E. 1095b 1-4.
Objects of knowledge "without qualification" are intuitive, immediate and universal. Objects of knowledge "to us" are empirical experiential and qualified. The objects of knowledge known without qualification require only the intellect and the immediacy of external reality. One can come to know what constitutes good, noble or just acts by doing them.

Hence anyone who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is noble and just and, generally, about the subject of political science must have been brought up in good habits.51

One must first acquire the character to act. This acquisition is the necessary beginning of morality and of understanding about morality. If one has been accustomed to doing the right things, even without knowing the reasons for doing them, then his potential and capacity for understanding the nature of ethical phenomenon will be generous.

In order to further and finally establish the unique character of the moral disciplines Aristotle next works his most critical evaluation of the book.

We had perhaps better consider the universal good and discuss what is meant by it, although such an inquiry is made an uphill one by the fact that the Forms have been introduced by friends of our own.52

51N.E. 1095b 3–6.
52N.E. 1095a 10–12.
According to Aristotle the theory of the Forms introduced by Plato, particularly with reference to the Form "Good", is fundamentally in error and has contributed to error. This criticism is consistent with Aristotle's naturalistic and methodological view. He denies a supernatural status to the "the Good" and locates it in the natural world. This denial also reflects his concern with accounting for particular instances of goodness. He says in Book I:

For the fact is the starting point, and if this is sufficiently plain to him he [the student of ethics] will not at the start need the reason as well.  

The point is that ethical training is a practical matter which begins with the factual situation itself. By repudiating the supernatural character of the Forms, Aristotle rejects Plato's moral intellectualism, the equation of virtue and knowledge, and establishes his fundamental distinction between the intellectual and the volitional.

There are four basic objections to Plato's Form theory in its application to the "Good." The objections challenge the metaphysical character of the Forms on the grounds that they can in no way maintain an independent ontological status and at the same time do justice to the world of particulars. The first

---

53N.E. 1095b 5.
objection takes this form. Proponents of the universal Form "Good",

Did not posit Ideas [Forms] of classes within which they recognized priority and posteriority which is the reason why they did not maintain the existence of a Form embracing numbers."^{54}

There can be no Form for number because a greater or lesser can always be conceived. There is a failure by these proponents to realize the inconsistency of positing a universal good which also has the same properties of priority and posteriority, for example, "good" is used both substantially and attributively. If good is substance then it is ontologically prior to any attributive aspect. Attributive aspects are accidental and participate in various classes of substance. Hence there would be an impossibility of a common form of the good which would embrace all the various particulars. If "good" is used attributively as well as substantially, then all its singular predications in categories other than substance would violate its singular nature as one Form or Idea. But, on the other hand, if there can be no universal predication of the good through all the categories there can be no particular goods. Thus if "good" is a universal Form, it must be singular, substantial and hence not attributable to any other category. If good is attributed to particular categories then it relinquishes its substantial singular nature as a Form.

^{54}N.E. 1096a 16-18.
The second objection is a slightly different facet of the first but is more directly applicable to the subject of method. The Platonists assign to every single Form a particular science to which it attends. Which Aristotle asks, is the single science of the Form "Good"? Good seems to be obtained in many different areas and sciences rather than one.\(^{55}\)

The third objection leveled is that the distinction between any absolute Form of a thing and the particular thing itself is an empty distinction. He states:

\begin{quote}
And one might ask the question, what in the world they mean by a thing in itself, if as is the case, in man himself, and in a particular man the account of man is one and the same.\(^{56}\)
\end{quote}

How is the particular man less than the Form "man"?

With the fourth objection Aristotle makes a semantic concession to the Platonists. He concedes that the good being discussed may be equivocal in signification, that is, the Platonists may not be speaking about all goods but merely that good loved for itself (the Form "Good"). Thus, goods may be spoken of in two ways, the above and in a secondary sense. The problem Aristotle suggests is, how one is to determine which are the goods that are goods in themselves? There are goods, which isolated seem to be goods in themselves, yet seem to be

\(^{55}\textit{N.E.} 1096\ 25-29.\)

\(^{56}\textit{N.E.} 1096a\ 33-35.\)
often pursued for other reasons. What "good" is there then that
is pursued for its own sake? Is the Idea of Good, good in itself?
This makes the Form contentless. If such isolated goods such as
virtue, intelligence, pleasure, etc., are actually goods in
themselves, then the explanation of "good" will need to have some
element that is common to all of these. Such an identical
element seems to be lacking.\textsuperscript{57}

By understanding Aristotle's criticism and departure from
Plato's theory of the "Good" one can see precisely what moral
philosophy means for Aristotle. What is explicitly rejected
here is the view that attempts to explain the moral qualities
evident in human society by referring them to an abstracted
entity which is ontologically prior. This rejection of the
strict metaphysical concept of good serves to explain the method
and substance of Aristotellean Ethics. Once the good as a meta­
physical entity is disregarded then its consideration changes
radically. The good then is sought for in society. Society
is the location for value. There are substantial pre-philosophical
opinions used by Aristotle as evidence. Morality is a firmly
constituted element in society prior to precise theoretical
conceptions about it. Consequently it is important for
Aristotle to examine intelligent opinion and practice in order
to extract the truth.

\textsuperscript{57}\textit{N.E.} 1096b 10-25.
We must consider it [happiness] in the light not only of our conclusion and premises but also of what is commonly said about it for with a true view all the data harmonize but with a false one the facts soon clash.\textsuperscript{58}

Aristotle considers a number of well established views about happiness and attempts to determine what elements of truth lie in these varying opinions.

For some identify happiness with virtue, some with practical wisdom, others with a kind of philosophic wisdom, others with these or one of these accompanied by pleasure or not without pleasure; while others include also external property. Now some of these views have been held by many men and of old, others by a few prominent persons; and it is not probable that either of these should be entirely mistaken.\textsuperscript{59}

Aristotle is looking to society for factual material to corroborate his theory. He is seeking to establish a balance between what is and what ought to be. Various elements in society that contribute to the formation of character and personality must be accounted for. Pleasure, virtue and property are basic human values with which every society must contend. To discover with what men are pleased and the consistency of the objects of pleasure reveals an essential connection between pleasure and happiness. So too with property, one must determine how it figures in happiness, how important and necessary it is, if at all.

\textsuperscript{58}\textit{N.E.} 1098a 10-12.

\textsuperscript{59}\textit{N.E.} 1098b 23-29.
Next, note what Aristotle says about the procedure of ethical inquiry. "We must be content, then in speaking of such subjects and with such premises to indicate the truth roughly and in outline." It should also be noted that Aristotle faithfully follows his own prescription. He provides an extensive outline noting both common and enlightened opinions, both difficulties involved in, and promises of, opinions. He attempts to touch all reasonable and salient aspects that could have application to moral considerations.

This consistent methodological practice establishes the priority treatment and development of the concept of virtue, the concept upon which the major portion of the Nicomachean Ethics elaborates. One must remember the purpose that Aristotle insists on is the end of ethical inquiry. "The end aimed at is not knowledge but action.... Therefore, if there is an end for all that we do, this will be the good achievable by action." This in part, explains the major emphasis on virtue. For virtue involves the practice and accomplishment of habits. It is a means that results in the end desired, happiness.

The answer to the question we are asking is plain also from the definition of happiness, for it has been said to be a virtuous activity of the soul.... Political science spends most of its pains on making the citizen to be of a certain character, viz. good and capable of noble acts.

---

60 N.E. 1096b 20-21.
61 N.E. 1094a 4, 1096a 24.
62 N.E. 1099b 25-30. 1097a 1-10.
The emphasis then is upon the achievement, the development of good character. But, one might ask, what is good character? The Platonists, Aristotle shows, advance the claim that knowledge of the "Good" may be of profit to anyone studying any sort of good as it may serve as an absolute and ameliorating standard. Aristotle grants that the argument has some merit but objects to it principally on methodological grounds.

This argument has some plausibility but seems to clash with the procedure of the sciences; for all of these though they aim at some good and seek to supply the deficiency of it leave on one side the knowledge of the good.

In other words, an ontological, simple and independent good can have no meaningful bearing upon particular goods. Good health can only be found in particular individuals.

This departure from Plato sharply demonstrates the firm naturalism of Aristotle's ethics and holds the answers to many questions concerning the structure and method of the _Nicomachean Ethics_. The metaphysical problem of the good for Aristotle has no immediate application to ethical philosophy. The aim is action, one comes to know what goodness is by doing good acts, thus the acquisition of the disposition is in practice prior to knowledge of what makes the act good. Consequently, one must

---


64 _N.E._ 1095a 1–5.
make virtue the principle consideration of ethics. By understanding the nature of virtue one can know how to become good. To discover what constitutes goodness one looks to society, one examines the institutions, practices and opinions therein. This follows simply and consistently with Aristotle's conception of human society as a natural arrangement.

This naturalism also explains why Aristotle draws no formal distinction between ethics and politics. Indeed, "politics" is the generic designation for the discipline which deals with morality. Ethics and economics are specified simply because they differ strictly in number of persons dealt with. The study of government is not for Aristotle as it is for the moderns, the study of the manipulation, distribution and preservation of power. Because human society is natural the relationship between man and the state is every bit as moral and reciprocal as any relationship between man and man.

In concluding in this chapter I wish to emphasize the point that the first book of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics is intended to set up the tension between the teleological and deontological interpretations, a tension which is manifested by his definition and treatment of the "Good" which is happiness as an intellectual value and by his assignment to the Statesman the business of cultivating the moral values in the people. In Plato's Republic the philosopher is the king; in Aristotle, philosophy and politics are two separate affairs, each being intrinsically valuable.
CHAPTER II

TELEOLOGY AND DEONTOLOGY

An interpretation of Aristotle's ethics as teleological can be derived principally from Books I and X of the **Nichomachean Ethics**, the first and final books of this work. These two books are emphatically teleologically in conception. This is I think, significant structurally because both books are concerned primarily with determining the good, the ultimate value of human existence. Book I poses arguments to prove that there is such a good or value, that that good is happiness, and that happiness consists in virtuous activity. Book X defines what kind of virtuous activity constitutes happiness, why it does so and why it does so in a way which no other activity can.

Central to the arguments of both these books is Aristotle's belief in a fixed concept of human nature. The "good" that Aristotle describes and prescribes in these two is a consequence of human nature. What is "good" means in this sense what is human and what is best is that which is consumately human. However, man is specified by Aristotle in two different ways. He is distinguished from other animals by virtue of his reasoning capacity.\(^{65}\) Man is also distinguished from other creatures by

\(^{65}\) _N.E._ 1097b 30, 1098a 5–10.
his social-political capacities.

Hence it is evident that the state is a creation of nature and that man is by nature a political animal...and it is characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state.66

These two definitions of man are essential to the ethical doctrines of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. But each is featured prominently at different points whereby an exclusive concentration may result in a misleading interpretation. The teleological emphasis of Books I and X is closely tied to definition of man as a rational animal. "Good" is defined in terms of ends, the human end is rationality. This construction considered by itself results in a wholly intellectualistic ethical system. It ascribes to moral phenomena no independent value status.

However, Aristotle is also concerned with accounting for man's social nature. He does this by the development of the concepts of moral virtue and practical wisdom. Book II develops the former, Book VI, the latter. These two books are more deontological in character. They establish ethics as an internally justified social aspect of human experience.

In the first six chapters of Book II Aristotle methodically

elucidates and refines the concept of moral virtue in a number of progressive steps. In chapter one he distinguishes moral from intellectual virtue. This distinction is made in terms of their origin or cause. In the Metaphysics, Aristotle says that the most essential part of knowledge is the recognition of causes; "for we say we know each thing only when we recognize its first cause."\textsuperscript{67} Intellectual virtue originates and is fostered by instruction; moral virtue is the consequence of practice.

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.\textsuperscript{68}

A morally virtuous state is a potential that is actualized by the consistent practice of virtuous activities. This raises a possible problem of circularity, (which will be dealt with later in the chapter), in that, if one is doing virtuous actions is he not already in some way virtuous?

Next in chapter 2, Book II, Aristotle describes the "mean"-like quality of virtue. At the beginning of this chapter he again insists upon the normative nature of this study. We aim at "being good" not knowing what goodness is.

\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Metaphysics}, 983b 25. W. D. Ross, translator.
\textsuperscript{68} N.E. 1103a 15-20.
He also reiterates the relative character of questions of conduct. Moral virtue is classified as a mean, determined by right rule, between excess and defect with regard to pleasure and pains.

This concept leads Aristotle to the next refining step, that of the relation of moral virtue to pleasure and pain. Pleasure and pain are vitally connected to moral virtue. "For moral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of the pain that we abstain from noble ones."69 Pleasure and pain are described as causes of misconduct. These are also the moral measure of our actions. Whether one is pleased or pained by an act indicates his moral state.

We must take as a sign of states of character the pleasure or pain that ensues on acts; for the man who abstains from bodily pleasures and delights in this very fact is temperate, while the man who is annoyed at it is self indulgent.70

Thus pleasure and pain are for Aristotle the instrumental psychological forces that play in the construction of character. It is the mean, a moderate balancing of the extremes of these states that characterizes moral virtue.

Moral virtue is next distinguished from ~xt. To do this Aristotle raises the earlier mentioned problem of circularity.

69 N.E. 1104b 10–12.
70 N.E. 1104b 5.
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 men do just and temperate acts, exactly as, if they do what is in accordance with the laws of grammar and of music, they are grammarians and musicians.\footnote{N.E. 1105a 15-20.}

An art, such as grammar, he maintains, can only be practiced, in the full sense of the term, by one who has a conscious internalized knowledge of the principles of that art. One may act grammatically or musically by chance or imitation which makes the action an artistic one only in an incidental way. This is also true of moral virtue. Virtuous actions must consciously proceed from a consistent character.

The difference between art and moral virtue lies in the value attached to the external consequences of each. The product of an artistic endeavor commands a value independent of the process of production. The value attached to a morally virtuous act is entirely contingent upon the internal disposition of the agent. In order for an act to qualify as virtuous it must satisfy the following conditions.

The agent also must be in a certain condition when he does them [virtuous acts]; 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.\footnote{N.E. 1105a 30, 1105b 1.}
The conditions of knowledge and choice are required for obvious reasons. They establish the responsibility of the agent. But, most significant for our purposes, are the requirements of choosing the actions for their own sakes and of the actions proceeding from a firm and unchangeable character. These requirements lend considerable force to an interpretation of moral value which is intrinsic in nature rather than consequential or teleological. That one should choose to perform a moral act for no other reason that that it is moral, suggests that morality has a legitimacy apart from its consequences.

Aristotle then, in chapters five and six of Book II, attempts to define virtue more specifically. It is one of three essential constituents of the soul: passions, faculties and states of character. He determines that it is a state of character, not passions, for passions come willy-nilly and do not involve choice which is an essential condition of virtue. Virtue is not a faculty because faculties come into existence by nature whereas moral virtue results from habit.\(^73\)

Having determined that virtue is a state of character Aristotle next attempts to describe what kind of state it is.

Every virtue or excellence both brings into good condition the thing of which it is the excellence and makes the work of that thing

\(^{73}\text{N.E. 1105b 20, 1106a 10.}\)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
be done well....Therefore, if this is true in every case, the virtue of man also will be the state of character which makes a man good and which makes him do his own work well.74

Virtue is the perfecting element of the human personality. Its existence establishes his individual integrity and renders worth to his achievements.

At this point Aristotle completes his delineation of the concept of moral virtue. To recapitulate: the first six chapters of Book II describe the phenomena of moral virtue or excellence. It is first of all distinguished from intellectual matters. Moral virtue must take into account significant non-rational aspects of human experience such as pleasure and pain because they figure considerably in motivation for action. This is an explicit repudiation of the Socratic dictum "virtue is knowledge." Aristotle's conception of moral virtue cannot legitimately be interpreted as intellectualistic because of the value and impact he attributes to the non-rational psychological forces which constitute the volitional dimension of the human psyche.

Moral virtue is defined specifically as a state of character which perfects the agent and his actions. This state of character assumes excellence or virtue at the conclusion of a long process of consistent habit forming directives so that whenever the agent acts he does solely because the act is

74N.E. 1106a 15-20.
The morally excellent person that Aristotle envisages is one who has practiced virtuous acts for so long and so consistently that it would be extremely painful for him to do otherwise.

The paradigm of the virtuous act lies in a mean. This "mean" is what Aristotle conceives as the ennobling, preserving measure of all human acts. The mean avoids excess and defect which result in vicious and unwholesome consequences.

Such then is Aristotle's analysis of moral virtue. He devotes the conclusion of Book II and the next three Books to the consideration of specific vices and virtues such as courage and temperance. His purpose is to determine the relation of the specific virtue, the mean, to the excesses and defects, vices, into which it may degenerate. There is however, a point that arises upon the introduction of the concept of the mean in Book II. The point concerns the epistemological determination of the mean. In his summary definition of moral virtue in Book II he says:

Virtue, is a mean, i.e., the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it.75

Here is the instrumental concept of practical wisdom. It determines what constitutes the mean. The concept of practical

75N.E. 1107a 1-5.
wisdom is developed in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* after Aristotle concludes his examination of specific virtues.

In examining the epistemological problem of practical wisdom I wish to emphasize three ways by which Aristotle treats the concept. He first of all examines the relation between practical wisdom and moral virtue or, in different words, the relation between intellect and character. He also examines practical wisdom in its relation to other intellectual virtues. And, thirdly, he looks at practical wisdom in the concrete, that is, he asks to what men do we attribute this virtue, who in fact, is the practically wise man?

Book VI opens by raising the problem of how the mean is determined.

There is a standard which determines the mean states which we say are intermediate between excess and defect, being in accordance with the right rule. But such a statement, though true is by no means clear; for not only here but in all other pursuits which are objects of knowledge it is indeed true to say that we must not exert ourselves nor relax our efforts too much nor too little, but to an intermediate extent and as the right rule dictates; but if a man had only this knowledge he would be none the wiser - e.g., we should not know what sort of medicines to apply to our body if someone were to say 'all those which the medical art prescribes, and which agree with practice of one who posses the art!' Hence it is necessary with regard to the states of the soul also that it should be determined what is the right rule and what is the standard that fixes it.76

76*N.E.* 1139b 25-35.
The point that Aristotle makes here is that to state that in matters of conduct we should aim at an intermediate state and do as the practically wise man does, is to make a judgement that is obviously true but substantially inadequate. He asks for a substantive account of principles that determine the mean. The mean, as he states, is determined by an appeal to the "right rule." How Aristotle determines this right rule is a crucial factor in interpretation as it constitutes the norm to which all moral judgements must appeal.

Aristotle attempts to show how the intellect functions with respect to character formation or how intelligence bears upon moral conduct in determining principles by which the agent is supposed to act.

Aristotle first distinguishes two kinds of reasoning capacities according to the kinds of objects with which they deal. There is a reasoning about necessary, invariable objects and relations which he terms scientific. There is a second kind of reasoning which deals with contingent affairs which he terms the calculative or the deliberative. He affirms that this calculative or deliberative reasoning faculty does grasp rational principles. "Therefore the calculative is one part of the faculty which grasps a rational principle."77

Now, how does the reasoning capacity enter into relation with moral virtue? He first defines moral virtue with respect

77N.E. 1139a 12.
to choice.

Moral virtue is a state of character concerned with choice and choice is deliberate desire; therefore both the reasoning must be true and the desire right, if the choice is to be good, and the latter must pursue what the former asserts.78

Intellectual Virtue (Pure Thought or Intellect) – Pertains to Truth & Falsity

Moral Virtue

\[
\text{Desire} - \text{Pertains to - Pursuit & Avoidance}
\]

\[
\text{Deliberate Reason} - \text{Pertains to - Truth & Falsity}
\]

\[
\text{Practical Wisdom} - \text{Choice}
\]

Choice = Correct Reasoning + Proper Desire

= Moral Virtue Embodied in a Particular State of Character

The key concept in this scheme is choice. Choice combines the strength and propriety of desire with the correctness of deliberative reason. Thus to be morally virtuous one must be able to reason properly in order to know what to choose. This requires a substantial amount of practical experience. Also, one must be inclined to make the proper choices, that is, to desire the right things. The purpose of moral character is to ensure intelligent action which can arise only out of a state of character which yearns for what is good and knows how to bring it about.

78 N.E. 1139a 20-25.
Aristotle has now identified the role of the intellect with respect to the moral capacity and function. Aristotle's next step is to determine what kind of intellectual process is involved in practical wisdom and what its relation is to other kinds of intellectual practices.

Of the five distinctive kinds of intellectual operations described by Aristotle in Book VI, chapter 3 (art, scientific knowledge, practical wisdom, philosophic wisdom, intuitive reason), it is practical wisdom which characterizes the intellectual dimension of moral conduct. Aristotle devotes the fifth chapter of Book VI to a discussion and definition of practical wisdom. It is important here that he begins by saying that in coming to an understanding of practical wisdom, "we shall get at the truth by considering who are the persons we credit with it."\textsuperscript{79} In order to understand the nature of practical wisdom it must first be identified in a concrete individual. This judgement implies that practical wisdom is a kind of an intellectual disposition determined by considerable experience rather than an organized objectively determined set of principles or a defined methodological procedure which serves to increase knowledge. Practical wisdom cannot be scientific or theoretical in nature because there are no first principles which are capable of being incontrovertably demonstrated. The principles

\textsuperscript{79}N.E. 1140a 25.
of practical wisdom are dictated by concrete experience and the practically wise man appeals to experience when required to make a choice, thus the more extensive and rich that experience is the more consistently reasonable his choice will be.

Aristotle makes additional claims for practical wisdom. It pertains to the "good life in general." It involves deliverative excellence. It cannot be scientific knowledge for the above given reason and it cannot be art because the value of art is derived from the achievement of the product, while moral activity obtains an intrinsic value. Finally he offers an ostensible definition of practical wisdom. "Practical wisdom then, must be a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human good." Practical wisdom by virtue of its definition is the intellectual process which pertains to moral dimensions. Moral virtue determines a condition which obtains good and proper desires while practical wisdom aims at best securing these objects of desire.

The identification and analysis by Aristotle of these two concepts, moral virtue and practical wisdom, serve to express an understanding of moral phenomenon which can account for its complexity. The concept of moral virtue pertains to non-rational elements, pleasure and pain, and the consequences these forces have in the way of shaping character. Because moral virtue does

80 N.E. 1140b 20.
not arise naturally and requires specifically defined human endeavors in order for it to be brought into being, the notion of education figures as a significant concept in terms of causal relevance. The recognition by Aristotle that moral virtue or excellence is the consequence of a systematic imposition of appetitive prescriptions attests to an unwillingness to make moral phenomenon an exclusive intellectual process. One must first be disposed to desiring what is good. This disposition must be integrated with a practical intellectual excellence (practical wisdom) experientially fostered, deriving its principles from the evidence of fruitful consequences.

As stated above, the two books of the Nichomachean Ethics, Books II and VI, which develop the above treated concepts of moral virtue and practical wisdom, indicate an orientation toward the subject matter which undermines a strict teleological character and introduce factors which betray on Aristotle's part a certain irresolution and ambiguity with respect to the precise role morals play within human experience.

Let us exploit this seeming ambiguity by scrutinizing the concept of moral virtue in terms of commonly conceived categories of justification, that is, justification by consequence and justification by intrinsic value. Does Aristotle justify moral actions solely by appeal to their consequences? What, in fact, does Aristotle consider to be a relevant consequence?

One of the consequences discussed in Books I and X, is the "Good." The good is an end desired for its own sake, it is the
ultimate purpose for action. All actions are undertaken with the hope, purpose and expectation that ultimately the good (happiness) will follow as a consequence. Thus, the criteria for determining whether an act is worthwhile is the existence of a reasonable expectation that it will make us happy.

There is another kind of consequence that is considered by Aristotle as relevant. First, we ask, what kind of actions make us happy? Actions that tend to produce happiness are ones that proceed from a particular kind of character, a moral character. Hence, one reason for acting in a moral manner is to produce a moral state or disposition. In other words, one hopes that a moral character will develop as a consequence of repeated moral acts. But what status of entelechy does this moral character have in the conceptual totality of Aristotle's ethical theory? Moral perfection, it seems, is in some way an accomplishment in and of itself desireable and laudable. Consider specifically Aristotle's remarks about the virtue of courage.

As we have said, then, courage is a mean with respect to things that inspire confidence or fear, in the circumstances that have been stated; and it chooses or endures things because it is noble to do so, or because it is base not to do so.81

81N.E. 1116a 10-12.
A person with a courageous character performs brave actions because the activity is by itself worthwhile.

So is it, it seems, that in order to be good one must be in a certain state when one does the several acts, that is, one must do them as a result of choice and for the sake of the acts themselves.\(^\text{82}\)

So the justifying consequences of actions in these considerations are different from those given in Book I; one performs virtuous actions solely because they are virtuous. This treatment by Aristotle of moral virtue establishes a deontological character within his ethics. This emphasis creates a problem with respect to Aristotle's teleological emphasis on the good, happiness, as being the justification for all that we do. The good, is a non-moral, theoretical goal. Happiness consists in philosophical contemplation. It has no need for moral virtue.

But that perfect happiness is a contemplative activity will appear from the following consideration as well. We assume the gods to be above all other beings blessed and happy; but what sort of actions must we assign to them? Acts of justice? Will not the gods seem absurd if they contracts and return deposits and so on? Acts of a brave man, then, confronting dangers and running risks because it is noble to do so? Or liberal acts? To whom will they give?...If we were to run through them all, the circumstances of actions would be found trivial and unworthy of gods.\(^\text{83}\)

\(^{82}\)N.E. 1144a 17-20.

\(^{83}\)N.E. 1178b 10-20.
Moral virtue is a practical goal. Its aim is to educate one to act properly. But the contemplative ideal excludes action as being an inferior activity. However, Aristotle, as indicated above, suggests that a moral character is a worthwhile end in itself, not completely a propaedeutic to the philosophical life. How then are these two seemingly contradictory elements to be understood? Is there, in fact, a contradiction? Is there a confusion or lack of resolution which brings about unresolvable theoretical aims?

I believe it would be fruitful to address this problem, at least partially by examining the historical consequences. Aristotle introduced two fundamental ethical concepts: consequence, and obligation. Yet, the full implications of both these concepts were not completely recognized.

Kantian moral philosophy and English utilitarianism represent the logical extremes to which each of these concepts were developed and incorporated as suppositions within the respective systems. Jeremy Bentham and J. S. Mill, two of the prominent representatives of utilitarianism, propose an ethical system in which the consequence of an action is the sole criteria for an estimate of its moral value. For Bentham, as for Aristotle, the purpose of human activities is to promote a state of happiness. The differences lies in the fact that Bentham holds pleasure and the absence of pain to be equatable with happiness, a view that would be unacceptable to Aristotle,
and utility as the principle which determines how pleasure is to be most effectively collectively promoted. Moreover, Bentham claims that pleasure and pain are the only criterion for moral value. Good will, good intentions cannot be considered when evaluating an act.

It is frequent to hear men speak of a good intention, of a bad intention: of the goodness and badness of a man's intention: a circumstances on which great stress is generally laid....Strictly speaking, nothing can be said to be good or bad, but either in itself; which is the case only with pain or pleasure: or on account of its effects; which is the case only with things that are the causes or preventives of plain and pleasure.

For Bentham pleasure and pain are sole criterion because only they can be subjected to objective measurement. His relegation of morality to psychology is the consequence of his radical empiricism, a methodology which aims to subject moral phenomenon to scientific calculation.

J. S. Mill advances, as does Bentham, the principle of utility as the only valid conceptual foundation for ethics.

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals utility, or the greatest happiness

---


85 loc. cit., p. 42.
principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By "happiness" is intended pleasure and the absence of pain.86

His departure from Bentham consists in his claim for a qualitative difference among available human pleasures. In this respect he is closer to Aristotle in that he believes that intellectual pleasures have a superiority to physical pleasures.87 He is, however, fully committed to the principle that actions are good or bad, irrespective of volitional or motivational considerations, by virtue of their consequences.

Utilitarian moralists have gone beyond almost all others in affirming that the motive has nothing to do with the morality of the action, though much with the worth of the agent. He who saves a fellow creature from drowning does what is morally right, whether his motive be duty, or the hope of getting paid for his trouble.88

Utilitarianism constitutes a pure form of teleological ethics. It is distinct from Aristotle's teleology, and, if so, where does this distinction come about? Both Aristotle and


88loc. cit., p. 343.
and Mill would be in disagreement over the nature of happiness; for Aristotle happiness consists in philosophic contemplation, for Mill, pleasure, albeit the pleasure is of an intellectual nature, it is nevertheless pleasure which is the ultimate consideration. Both philosophers would be in agreement that conduciveness to happiness is the primary consideration in evaluating human actions. The significant distinction between the two lies in Mill's emphasis on the material act over internal considerations of will and motivation. One of the reasons for the emphasis is that, for Mill, happiness consists of pleasurable experiences. Pleasure can be the immediate consequence of an act. Thus the action and its immediate consequences command primary status and value. Pleasure and pain are central considerations for Aristotle, but not as ends, rather as means for the shaping of character. He does not speak of a moral or virtuous action apart from a moral or virtuous character out of which that act proceeds. "Actions, then, are called just and temperate when they are such as the just or the temperate man would do."89 Aristotle insists upon the integration of act and character whereas Mill consistently requires their separation. This analysis, I believe, demonstrates that Mill's position constitutes a teleology that is stricter and more consistent than Aristotle's. In strict teleological

89N.E. 1105b 5.
terms an action can be determined good or bad only in as much as it promotes or hinders achievement of the defined goal. In Mill's terms, the more an activity conduces to bring about a pleasurable state, the more worthwhile it is. It might be argued that Aristotle's insistence on perfection of moral character is to be interpreted as meaning that morality is to be considered solely as a means to achieve his end, happiness. However, it has already been suggested that morality is justified intrinsically, as an achievement independent of happiness. This insistence by Aristotle on the absolute value of character reveals an unwillingness to draw the strict separation between concepts of consequence and duty. Mill insists upon the separation for a number of reasons. One reason is his methodology. Mill, as Bentham, is fully committed to empiricism. If happiness can be made more objectively determinable, then ethical principles and rules themselves would be less arbitrary and dogmatic and their consequences more socially ameliorating and equitable. Determining the existence or value of dispositions, intentions and motives is much more difficult than determining the extension and quality of pleasure and pain. Thus in terms of this method, the principle of utility, the tendency of the act to promote happiness, assumes the full import within the system.

A second reason for Mill's strict teleological distinction arises from his conception of political philosophy. As a
nineteenth-century advocate of parliamentary democracy, his political philosophy is conceived in terms of defining relationship of state's political institutions and authority to the order of civil society. His paradigm of government is one which would maintain a peaceful and equitable social order, yet promote, to the greatest extent possible, the individual freedom of its citizens. Mill holds that personal freedom is the ultimate political aim and that government power and authority should exist solely to bring about that end.

The object of this essay [On Liberty] is to assert one very simple principle....That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self protection.90

This is a profound contrast to Aristotle's paternalistic concept of the state.

If we are right in our view, and happiness is assumed to be virtuous activity, the active life will be the best, both for every city collectively, and for individuals.... Hence it is evident that the same life is best for each individual, and for states and mankind collectively.91

Aristotle sees no qualitative difference between the state and

---

91Politics, 1325b 15-30.
the individual. He does not, as do modern political theorists, distinguish between a formal state and a civil society. Consequently morality is as every bit a social ideal as it is an individual one. The function then of the statesman is a much more ambitious and positive one than the modern conception of Mill. The statesman's function is to make virtuous citizens of his subjects. The state, because of its purpose to secure a collective good, is superior in value and status to the individual.

For mankind always act in order to obtain that which they think good. But if all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at a good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good.92

In light of these two differing conceptions of meaning and extention of the state, the reasons why Mill's and Aristotle's construction of the moral justification differ becomes more intelligible. Because individual autonomy is paramount and the state exists to serve that end, the external action and its conduciveness to promote that end take on importance to the exclusion of other considerations for Mill. Character is the business of the individual. He can only be evaluated and held responsible for what he does. Only what he does can be subjected to public scrutiny. If his action brings about no

92Politics, 1252a 1-5.
impediment to others it is tyrannical to sanction him.

The state, for Aristotle, is a much more integral and positive institution. The well being, the perfection of the individual is contingent upon his participation in a social arrangement which cultivates his human capacities. "He who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity." Thus an individual's entire moral being is caught up in the social order. Because character is essential for living well and it is the state's purpose to make its citizens virtuous, character and the intrinsic value of moral action are treated as an essential part of morality.

Pure deontological ethics is best exemplified in the writings of Immanuel Kant. Kant's ethical system is in conception, directly antithetical to J. S. Mill's system. For Kant an act can be morally esteemed only if it is done from an absolute purity of the will. He says at the beginning of the first section of the Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals:

"Nothing in the world—indeed nothing even beyond the world can possibly be conceived which could be called good without qualification except a good will." The concept of the good will is embodied in the formal principle of morality which Kant believes to be the valid universal principle which must be applied

\[93\text{Politics 1253a 1.}\]

\[94\text{Kant, "Foundations", op. cit., p. 71.}\]
to any situation that demands moral action. This principle which is strictly formal, that is, free of any empirical and thus contingent considerations, makes its expression as an unconditional moral imperative, in Kant's terminology, a categorical imperative.

The condition for the application of the categorical imperative arises because man finds himself as a being subject to the physical causality of the sensible world. He has appetites, inclinations, physical and psychological drives which to an extent determine his conduct and give shape to his ideals. However, he is also a rational creature. Rationality enables him to transcend his contingent and relative position in the sensible world, the world of appearances, or phenomena as Kant terms it, and to conceive universal laws of conduct and act upon them. Man can act as a noumenal being.

By this freedom the will of a rational being, as belonging to the sensuous world, recognizes itself to be, like all other efficient causes, necessarily subject to the laws of causality, while in practical matters, in other aspects as a being in itself it is conscious of its existence in an intelligible order of things.95

Moral obligation, the call for the categorical imperative arises out of a tension between two modes of existences. For Kant, two major considerations are involved in any moral act. First, there is the end for which an act is done, the material

---

95 Immanuel Kant, "Critique of Practical Reason", op.cit, p. 152.
consequences which are expected from it. The principles for action, in this case, are based on subjective desires or inclinations which lead one to act so as to obtain the object desired. A man tells the truth in order to establish a reputation which promotes his personal, business, or political interests. Is this man acting in a moral capacity according to Kant? While such a man would be acting prudently he would not be considered to be acting morally because the principle of action in this case is self interest. And while the motive and the telling of truth coincide, the motive can never be by itself affirmed as a universal principle as many instances may arise when truth telling runs counter to ones personal interests. The second consideration is that of the act apart from its consequences, the act as being internally self justifying. When one tells the truth simply because one believes honesty to be a good in itself, then the act is unconditionally morally pure. The cause of the act is an objective one determined by the conception and application of practical reason rather than by a subjective causality. Obligation arises out of a possible conflict between what is dictated by desires and ambitions and what is prescribed by practical reason which ignores the consequences of the act and orders the act because of its intrinsic worth. The act must be done solely for the reason of obligation.

This principle of obligation imposes an imperative character
which is categorical. "Act as if the maxim of thy action were
to become by the will a universal law of nature." Kant, "Foundations", op. cit. p. 38. The moral principle must be unconditionally and universally applicable.

If, for Kant, moral dilemmas are resolved by this rule it is impossible to err because to will any vicious or benighted act, even though one gains from it, would result in a contradiction of will if one attempts to universalize that will. If one universally wills to lie in order to avoid an unpleasant consequence one, in effect, negates the institution of truth telling for if this practice were universally accepted the institution would itself crumble.

Kant is the paradigm deontologist. Aristotle's similarity with Kant lies in their mutual recognition of the moral value of the motive for action and that a person must not only do the right thing but must do it because it is the 'the right thing' to do. However Aristotle departs from Kantian deontology in that he doesn't make as radical a distinction between the concept of well being and the concept of moral obligation as Kant. Aristotle's conception of man, in this respect, is more unified than Kant's. There is no noumenal-phenomenal dualism which has man participating in two orders, one determined and one free. Man participates fully in the natural order and sees

\[96\text{Kant, "Foundations", op. cit. p. 38.}\]

\[97\text{loc. cit., p. 40.}\]
his needs and desires as being fully compatible with the fulfillment of obligations undertaken as a part of his social nature. Thus, there is not the necessity on Aristotle's part to make personal well being a wholly separate concern from moral obligation.

Kant's system is a culmination of ethics founded upon obligation and an explicit repudiation of teleology. It is not intended here to critically evaluate the positions of Kant and the Utilitarians. There are considerable flaws and weaknesses in both systems. The purpose of introducing these systems is to show how far the concepts of teleology and deontology can be separately and consistently developed so as to gain greater insight into Aristotle's treatment and resolution of these concepts, and to determine to what extent, if any, it makes sense to call Aristotle a deontologist.

In the preceding paragraphs we have seen employed by Aristotle, two different approaches to moral virtue which do not appear to be reconcilable. He approaches moral virtue on the one hand solely as a means to achieve happiness, which is a wholly contemplative non-moral state. Yet elsewhere in the same treatise he speaks of moral virtue as something to be cultivated for its own sake.

These two approaches create an ambiguity which is to some extent unresolvable. Professor William Frankena, in his book Three Historical Philosophies of Education, directs his attention to this problem.
Most interpreters take him [Aristotle] to be a teleologist (either egoistic or nationalistic) almost without discussion, as both Joachim and Ross do. I am inclined to agree with them on the whole, but I think there are considerations that point to a deontological interpretation of Aristotle and that there is no decisive way of determining just what his position is.98

Frankena distills from the text the two basic alternative interpretations. The first is: Aristotle holds the good to be happiness and happiness to be contemplation. Morally excellent activity serves that good. This is the teleological interpretation. The second, the deontological, is: the good is happiness, happiness consists in contemplation and in moral excellence, and furthermore moral excellence is determined by principles derived from perception or intuition or divine command.99

Frankena leans toward the teleological interpretation because of Aristotle's pervasive means-end idiom and because of what he believes is a fixed Aristotelean view that all things aspire to God and God's life is a wholly contemplative one, a view which he believes is well illustrated in the final passage of the Ethica Eudemia.100

99loc. cit., p. 35
100loc. cit, p. 35-36.
God...is the end with a view to which prudence issues its commands....That choice then...which will most promote the contemplation of God is most excellent; this is the noblest standard. But any that through deficiency or excess hinders one from the contemplation and service of God is bad.\textsuperscript{101}

But, as Frankena himself admits, this passage was quite possibly, as Werner Jaeger claims,\textsuperscript{102} written in Aristotle's earlier days and hence in a more Platonic posture.\textsuperscript{103} Moreover, if we consider the manner in which moral principles are determined and examine the conclusions of the tenth book of the Nicomachean Ethics, there seems to be plausible evidence for a deontological interpretation.

In an article entitled "Aristotle's Ethical Intuitionism" in The New Scholasticism, Bernard Baumerin maintains that Aristotle is decisively a deontologist.

At no significant point in his analysis of moral virtue does Aristotle appeal to consequences as relevant, much less decisive, in choosing the mean relative to us....Indeed...Aristotle's definition of practical wisdom depends on the position that good is itself the aim of action (1140b 7) and for a man to be good he must do what he does "as a result of choice and for the sake of the acts themselves." (1144a 19).\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{101}Ethica Eudemia, 1249b 15-20. W. D. Ross, translator.


\textsuperscript{103}Frankena, op. cit., p. 36.

\textsuperscript{104}Baumerin, op. cit., p. 11-12.
Central to Baumrin's interpretation is Aristotle's treatment of the right rule. As mentioned above (page 53) right rule is the standard which determines the mean. But how is the right rule determined? If one ascribes to a strict teleology the source of the principles to be applied is obvious. The principles are derived from the predetermined goal. The principles, the right rule, can be determined by deciding what course of action maximizes the possibility of achievement of that good. Deontological principles are a different case. What is the source? There must be some criterion other than the possibility for achieving the sought after good. In teleology, the maximization of non-moral goods (in Aristotle's case, philosophic contemplation) is the essence of the theory, the question is, how, what principles do we use to maximize?\textsuperscript{105}

For Kant, the principles are derived \textit{a priori} from reason itself. The validity of the principles are tested by their capacity to sustain universality without self-negation. What about Aristotle? If he is interpreted in the deontological sense how do we understand him to establish the source of ethical principles?

In Book IV of the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, Aristotle speaks of the difficulty involved in determining the mean.

How far, therefore, and how a man must stray before he becomes blameworthy, it is not easy to state in words for the decision depends on the particular facts and on perception.\textsuperscript{106}


\textsuperscript{106}N.E. 1226b 1-5.
According to Baumrin, Aristotle holds that ethical principles are derived ultimately from perception, a perception which is essentially of an intuitive nature, "not the perception of qualities peculiar to one sense but a perception akin to that by which we perceive that the particular figure before us is a triangle." In Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle further describes this perceptive intuitive process.

All thinks which have to be done are included among particulars or ultimates; for not only must the man of practical wisdom know particular facts, but understanding and judgement are also concerned with things to be done, and these are ultimates. And intuitive reason is concerned with the ultimates in both directions; for both the first terms and the last are objects of intuitive reason and not of argument, and the intuitive reason which is presupposed by demonstrations grasps the unchangeable and first terms, while the intuitive reason involved in practical reasonings grasps the last and variable fact, i.e., the minor premiss. For these variable facts are the starting points for the apprehension of the end, since the universals are reached from the particulars; of these therefore we must have perception, and this perception is intuitive reason.

Such texts as these suggest an Aristotelean view which does not appeal to non-moral goods or values as the principles from which ethical norms are derived. The point is that intuitive percepts are considered the source of ethical principles. Aristotle seems to be espousing a form of intuitionism. His claim, that intuitive reason grasps the ultimates, makes knowledge of moral rules, judgements derived intuitively from

---

107 *N.E.* 1142a 28-29.

experiences, justified epistemologically as simple, first term
perceptions. If this in fact is the case, then Frankena's
second proposed interpretation appears more accurate than the
first.

Morally excellent action is seen to be
right by 'perception' or which conforms to
certain rules whose validity rests not on
a consideration of consequences, but on
intuition, tradition, or divine command.¹⁰⁹

At the beginning of this chapter I stated that Aristotle
specifies man in two different ways. Man is a rational animal
and man is a political animal. Both rationality and society
are essential human ideals. Yet, these two ideals constitute
a duality out of which two kinds of perfect men emerge for
Aristotle: the philosopher and the statesman. This duality
is most apparent and pronounced in the tenth book of the
Nicomachean Ethics in which Aristotle draws the strings of the
work together and makes his conclusions. In Book X he speaks
of both the philosopher and the statesman, and more importantly,
determines their relative value. Discussing first the
philosopher, he says that philosophical activity is the ultimate
value.

If happiness is actively in accordance
with virtue, it is reasonable that it
should be in accordance with the highest
virtue....That this activity is
contemplation we have already said.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹Frankena, op. cit., p. 35.

¹¹⁰N.E. 1177a 15-20.
But he goes on to say that contemplation is dependent upon leisure and that leisure is attained and sustained by political activity which is by nature unleisurely and hence subordinate to the higher contemplative activity.

So if among virtuous actions political and military actions are distinguished by nobility and greatness, and these are unleisurely and aim at an end and are not desirable for their own sake, but the activity of reason, which is contemplative seems both to be superior in serious worth and to aim at no end beyond itself.111

However, Aristotle qualifies this contemplative ideal.

But such a life [a contemplative one] would be too high for man; for it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him.112

It is through the cultivation of reason by which man transcends his mortal human nature. But as a human being there is a lesser more attainable form of happiness which is realized through morality and social institutions. "But in a secondary degree the life in accordance with the other kind of virtue is happy; for the activities in accordance with this befit our human estate."113 This is the perfection that man achieves as

111N.E. 1177b 15-20.
112N.E. 1177b 25.
113N.E. 1178a 10.
a social-political creature, lesser in value but more attainable and more human. The statesman is the paradigm of this ideal in as much he represents the embodiment of social virtues. The statesman enacts laws which produce a society of good people.

But it is difficult to get from youth up a right training for virtue if one has not been brought up under right laws.... For this reason their [young peoples] nurture and training should be fixed by law.11^4

Most men do not develop philosophical rationality. The kind of rationality they do achieve is a preservative replacement for natural instinct in the form of a social arrangement which replaces instinct with education. This is a totality, complete, apart from philosophical speculation. Its perfection is a practical moral perfection. This is true of most men. Man is by nature a political creature. The development of this nature is through political institutions. Morality perfects the institutions. How? It establishes within men a certain kind of character, a kind of disposition to act preservingly in the case of courage and temperance, and to act justly in the case of material goods.

Aristotle, by holding that man’s ultimate value is philosophical contemplation, must invoke a teleological conception of human action which subordinates all other activities, including morality to a lesser status. However this contemplative

11^4N.E. 1179b 30-35.
ideal is for Aristotle an ultra-human ideal. Typically human ideals are realized in a well ordered society. The state itself is a moral ideal. Its purpose is to make men good. In the Politics, Aristotle says that "political society exists for the sake of noble actions."\(^{115}\) It is in this aspect that goodness and morality are equatable and morality takes on the character of an established end in itself.

Thus it would seem that Frankena's evaluation "that there is no decisive way of determining just what his [Aristotle's] position is," is too cautious. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that he is both teleologist and deontologist. W. D. Ross, who, as Frankena mentions, interprets Aristotle as an ethical teleologist, alludes to the problem I have raised in the final page of this chapter on Aristotle's Ethics.

The part assigned to the moral life then by Aristotle seems to be twofold. (1) It constitutes a secondary form of well being, one which we are driven to fall back upon by the fact that we are not all reason and cannot live always on the level of the contemplative life. And (2) it helps to bring into being the higher kind. Aristotle says very little about how it does this....But though his formal theory thus makes the moral life subsidiary to the intellectual, this relation is not worked out in detail. When Aristotle is engaged in studying the moral activities he treats them as good in themselves, and the moral agent as finding his motive in nothing beyond the act, but in its own nobility. In effect he assigns a higher value to the moral life than his formal theory warrants.\(^{116}\)

---

\(^{115}\)Politics 1281a 1.

The second to the last sentence in this quotation, "when Aristotle is engaged in studying the moral activities he treats them as good in themselves, and the moral agent as finding his motive nothing beyond.", amounts to an admission of Aristotle's failure or, perhaps better said, unwillingness to be thoroughly teleological.

When Aristotle is speaking generally about human nature and social institutions he speaks as a teleologist, as in the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where he states that all human activities aim at some good. His basic view of the world is teleological and man as a part of the natural order simply must have an end or purpose. But when he deals with the subjects of morality and political activity he speaks as a deontologist. Moral virtue becomes an end in itself. He sees society as the place where man perfects his moral nature, a place where morally virtuous qualities are highly exalted as achievements in their own right.
CONCLUSION

In this study I have attempted to apply two basic ethical conceptual categories to Aristotle's ethical system. Attempts to label Aristotle as a teleologist or deontologist can have value only to the extent to which they contribute to an understanding of his thought and to an analysis of the concepts themselves and how these concepts must apply to an understanding of ethical problems.

In assessing Aristotle's thought I have attempted to show that his ethical formulations proceed from a general view in which man is perceived as a member of the natural order and that that order itself is vested with purpose. Thus the question, what is best for man, calls for an answer which defines his purpose and the means to attain it. Aristotle defines man as both a rational and a social animal, and sees his perfection lying in the cultivation of his reasoning powers and in the development of his social being. It is morality which perfects him as a social being and moral education is absolutely primary if he is to realize his human potential, for it is morality which brings into existence a well ordered society from which proceeds pursuits both theoretical and practical. Thus while the context of Aristotle's thought is constructed in a teleological framework there is at the same time a concern for the intrinsic value of moral conduct.
The concept of ends and the concept of intrinsic moral value are fundamental to any coherent ethical system. While Aristotle is devoted principally to man’s end, he recognized the importance of intrinsic moral value and constructed an ethical system which would be criticized for its failure to develop a complete theory of obligation and praised for its analysis of human nature.
REFERENCES

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources - Books


Secondary Sources - Periodicals


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
