

Aristotle's Conception of the Good for Man

By

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*it is thoroughly slavish
to long for mere life instead of
for the good life.*

aristotle,
protrepticus

Aristotle is universally acknowledged as one of the world's greatest thinkers. The whole of his philosophic works represents the "most solid and most extensive" result of Greek intellectual activity, synthesizing and bringing to a close the intellectual efforts of a race.¹ His greatness, however, lies not merely on the important position he occupies in the history of Greek thought, but essentially on the immense influence he has on the speculative reflection of succeeding philosophers.² For it is claimed that the intellectual history after the time of Aristotle has been largely or in part a debate between Platonists and Aristotelians,³ and that Aristotle's philosophy "contains the first statement, explicit or by opposition, of many of the technical distinctions, definitions and convictions on which later science and philosophy have been

¹Fernand Van Steenberghen, *Aristotle in the West*, trans. Leonhard Johnston (Louvain: E. Nauwelaert's Publisher, 1955), 15.

²Cf. W. Jaeger, *Aristotle: The Fundamentals of the History of His Development* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 15-16; Cf. also F. van Steenberghen, *op. cit.*, 15-16; R. McKeon, "The Hellenistic and Roman Foundations of the Traditions of Aristotle in the West," *The Review of Metaphysics*, 32 (June, 1979), 677.

³R. McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), XVI.

based."⁴ Thus, Aristotle's influence extends from his day to the present and his thought actually forms an integral part of what is called the Western intellectual tradition that is the heritage of every educated person.⁵

The important position of Aristotle in the whole history of philosophic thought bears testimony to the intrinsic worth of his works and does justice to the respectable and authoritative title, "The Philosopher," which was conferred on him by another great thinker - St. Thomas Aquinas.

The thought of Aristotle may not contain the gospel truth on every significant philosophical issue, but anyone who seriously explores his vast and encyclopedic writings would not doubt discover for himself the invaluable contributions of Aristotle in the spheres of logic, physics, metaphysics, ethics, politics and rhetoric. I think it is really worthwhile to study Aristotle and recognize these important contributions. Undertaking such a project, however, is not the intent to this paper. What I shall attempt to do is simply to return to Aristotle's classic ethical theory and specifically direct my attention to his perspective concerning *the good for man*. I think the examination of this classic moral theory would be an opportunity for us to go back to one of the great texts of the philosophical tradition from which we may draw ideas that would broaden and deepen our understanding of the good life.

There are three ethical treatises that have come down to us under the name of Aristotle - the *Magna Moralia*, the *Eudemian Ethics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The first one is simply a collection of excerpts from two other works and may be disregarded.⁶ Though considered as a work of the Peripatetic school, the *Magna Moralia* is no longer attributed to Aristotle himself. For a long time regarded as a spurious work of Aristotle and ascribed to Eudemus of Rhodes as editor and author, the *Eudemian Ethics* is recently established by some Aristotelian scholars as an authentic and earlier work of Aristotle on ethics.⁷ The *Nicomachean Ethics* which was edited by Aristotle's son, Nicomachus, represents another genuine but later work of Aristotle on ethics. Books V - VII of the latter work are identical with books IV - VI of the earlier *Eudemian Ethics*. So, this would be a case of a part of an earlier work embodied in a later one.⁸ In this light, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, whose authorship has never been doubted, expresses the more mature thought of Aristotle on ethics and embodies the essential points of his whole ethical system. I shall base my treatment of Aristotle's conception on the good for man mainly on the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The point of departure for the discussion of this theme is the following passage from the aforementioned

⁴*Ibid.*, XI.

⁵Cf. Ross, *Aristotle* (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1966), Preface, IX.

⁶Jaeger, *op. cit.*, 228.

⁷*Ibid.*, 228ff.

⁸Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans., introduction and notes, by Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1975), XVIII.

work. This passage expresses in a nutshell the essential insight of Aristotle into the "good for man."

"... Human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete.

But we must add 'in a complete life'. For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or short time, does not make a man blessed and happy."⁹

The elaboration and explication of the above passage shall be taken up in the following discussion.

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS ON THE GOOD

Aristotle thinks that a knowledge of the chief good or the highest good is very important in our lives; so, we must try to determine, at least in outline, what this good is.¹⁰ However, before presenting his own views on this matter, Aristotle first considers the views of others - the popular opinions and the ideas of some philosophers particularly those of the Platonists. He thinks that in formulating answers to our questions, it is good "to call into council the views of those of our predecessors who have declared any opinion on this subject, in order that we may profit by whatever is sound in their suggestion and avoid their errors."¹¹

Popular Views. The common man and the cultivated person refer to happiness as the highest good attainable by action, and both consider this as "being happy," "living well," or "doing well." Although they agree on the name, they disagree on the definition or meaning of happiness. The account of the ordinary run of men differs from that of the wise men or philosophers. The former say that it consists in some good such as pleasure, wealth or honor. Sometimes, the same man identifies the good with different things - he wants money when he is poor, health when he is ill, or knowledge and wisdom when he acknowledges his ignorance.¹²

Aristotle goes on to say that when we consider the lives men lead, we can discern three prominent types of life from which we derive different concepts of good and happiness. These are the life of enjoyment, the political life, and the life of contemplation.¹³ The majority of mankind - men of the most

⁹Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 7, 1098a15-18. [See Richard McKeon, *Introduction to Aristotle* (New York: The Modern Library, 1947) for references to passages in the works of Aristotle; See also Martin Ostwald's translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Hereafter, this work on ethics will simply be referred to in the notes as *NE*.

¹⁰*NE*, I, 2, 1094a22.

¹¹Aristotle, *On the Soul*, I, 2, 203b22.

¹²*NE*, I, 4, 1095a15-25.

¹³*NE*, I, 5, 1095b14ff.

vulgar type - seem to identify the good or happiness with pleasure and live the life of enjoyment; they are slavish in their tastes and prefer a life suitable to beasts. Aristotle thinks that the opinion of these men have a basis, since many people in high positions share the taste of Sardanapallus - a man in antiquity noted for his sensual excesses.¹⁴ But those of "superior refinement and of active disposition" identify happiness with honor; they lead the life of the politician or the statesman and seek honor as an end. Aristotle thinks, however, that honor cannot be the good we are seeking - something proper to man and cannot be easily taken from him. For honor is thought to depend on those who confer it rather than on him who receives it. Besides, men pursue honor to be assured of their goodness; they want to be honored on the basis of virtue or excellence. Thus, for the man who seeks honor, virtue is better.¹⁵ And one can suppose that it is not honor but virtue which is the end of political life. But, even virtue appears somewhat inadequate as an end. Aristotle says that one can possess virtue if asleep or inactive all his life, or while going through sufferings and misfortunes. But no one would call such a man happy.¹⁶

He goes on to point out that leading a life in pursuit of wealth is another way of living one's life. But he says that wealth cannot be the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful, not an end in itself but a means to something else.¹⁷

The Platonic View. Aristotle also considers the view of some philosophers concerning the good. Referring particularly to Plato and his disciples, Aristotle says that some think that over and above the many goods, there is something good in and by itself from which the goodness of all things comes.¹⁸ Before finally advancing his own ideas on the good for man, Aristotle takes a stand with respect to this platonic view.¹⁹

Aristotle accepts Plato as a friend, but he rejects the latter's conception of the good. He says that although Plato and truth are both dear to him, "piety requires us to honor truth above our friends."²⁰

¹⁴NE, I, 5, 1095b22. See also Ostwald's translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, 8.

¹⁵NE, I, 5, 1095b29.

¹⁶NE, I, 5, 1095b30.

¹⁷NE, I, 5, 1096a4ff.

¹⁸NE, I, 4, 1095a26ff.

¹⁹In one of his recent works, Hans-Georg Gadamer applies the leading notions of his philosophical hermeneutics in re-examining Aristotle's classic texts on ethics. He underscores the significant place of the idea of the good in these ethical works. Despite Aristotle's insistence that such idea does not have a practical bearing, Gadamer claims that this Idea of the Good is the "shared common ground" on which rests Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy. This line of thought is not developed here since this paper does not particularly intend to compare Aristotle's thought on the good with that of Plato. To follow closely Gadamer's development of his thesis, see Gadamer's *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. and with an intro. by P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); see also Francis J. Ambrosio review of the above work cited in the *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 27 (June, 1987), 214-15.

²⁰NE, I, 6, 1096a15.

In the Platonic view, there exists a "Good in itself", the "Form of Good" which is the first of all goods and the source of all goodness that may be found anywhere in this world. All other goods are good only in the sense of participating in it, and if that in which things participate were to be destroyed, the ones participating in the Form would also be destroyed. The "Good in itself" or the "Form of Good" exists independently of the things which participate in it just as the other forms do. To refute this view concerning the good, Aristotle presents certain arguments which, for the most part, are based on strictly logical considerations.²¹

First of all, Aristotle says that the adherents of the theory did not admit Ideas or Forms out of those classes within which they recognize an order of priority and posteriority; it is precisely for this reason that they deny that there is one Idea embracing all numbers.²² But the term "good as such" is used in the category of substance (that which is *per se*) as well as in that of quality or relation which is an accident (that which is inhering in a substance). Now, substance or that which exists *per se* in prior in nature to the relative which is an offshoot or an accident of substance.²³ Therefore, there can be no Idea common to "good in itself" or "good as relation"; there is no single "Form of Good" set over all the other goods.

Secondly, the term "good," just like "being," has many senses: it is predicated of things in the category of substance - God and reason are good; of qualities - virtues are good; of relation - the useful is good; of time - the right time is good; of place - the right place is good, and so forth. So, it is clear that the good cannot be something universal, common to all cases, and at the same time single; otherwise, it could not be predicated of things in all the categories but only in one.²⁴

Thirdly, since for all the things that answer to one Idea or Form there is only one science, then there should have been only one science of all the good things. But the case is that there are many sciences even of the many goods that fall under one category. Take for example the right amount of opportunity: in war, it is the proper concern of strategy; in treating a disease, it is the concern of medicine; in exercise, it is the subject of gymnastics.²⁵

Fourthly, Aristotle asks what really is meant by "thing itself." If, for example, "man" applies to both "man himself" and a "particular man," then there would be no difference between the two; they are one and the same. Likewise, in "good itself" and "particular goods," there is no difference since all are goods.²⁶

²¹See Oates, *Aristotle and the Problem of Value* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, c1963), 267.

²²NE, I, 6, 1096a16.

²³NE, I, 6, 1096a17ff.

²⁴NE, I, 6, 1096a29ff.

²⁵NE, I, 6, 1096a33ff.

²⁶NE, I, 6, 1096a34-1096b3.

Aristotle further says that the "good itself" is not more of a good because it is eternal. After all, whiteness which lasts for a long time is not whiter than white which lasts only for a day.²⁷

He also points out that the Platonists have not been referring to all goods. Only those which are pursued and loved for themselves are called "good" by reference to a single Form; those which produce the good, guarantee their permanence or prevent their opposite from asserting themselves, are called good in a secondary sense because they are conducive to the intrinsically good.²⁸ It seems then that good has two senses: that which is good in itself, and that which is good by reason of the first good. We can separate the things which are good in themselves from those that are useful and examine whether the former are called good by reference to a single Idea.²⁹

What sort of goods may be considered good in themselves? Would it be those pursued for their own sake without regard to additional benefits, such as intelligence, sight, certain pleasures and honors? Even if we pursue these for the sake of something else, we can still consider them as good in themselves. Or in nothing good in itself except the Idea of Good? If the latter is the case, then the Idea or Form of Good will be empty. But if sight and all the other goods cited above belong to the group of goods in themselves, then the same definition of good will have to be manifested in all of them just as whiteness is identical in snow and white lead. However, in the case of honor, wisdom and pleasure, the accounts or definitions of good are different and distinct. The good, then, is not something common to all things derived from one Idea.³⁰ But what, then, is meant by "good" in these different things? Do they just have the same name? If they are given the same name, is it because they are all derived from one good or because they all aim at a single good? Or are they called good by analogy? Should we say, then that as sight is good in the body so is reason in the soul, and so are others in their respective fields? Aristotle gives no definite answer to the questions and says that a detailed discussion of these belongs to another branch of philosophy, i.e., first philosophy.³¹

As a final note on the Platonic good, Aristotle says that granting there is a single good which has a separate and independent existence and is universally predicable of all other goods, it is unachievable or unattainable. But the good we are seeking is something that can be realized and attained by man.³²

²⁷NE, I, 6, 1096b4.

²⁸NE, I, 6, 1096b10ff.

²⁹NE, I, 6, 1096b13ff.

³⁰NE, I, 6, 1096b27ff.

³¹NE, I, 6, 1096b32.

³²NE, I, 6, 1096b32-35.

The "good itself" may be taken as a model or pattern that can give us a better knowledge of what is good for us and help us attain it. But the sciences do not actually consider it as such. The sciences aim at some good and seek to realize it, but they set aside the knowledge of the "good itself." Furthermore, the knowledge of this good is not really of great help to the craftsman who does not know about it and does not even seek it. One would wonder how a weaver or a carpenter, for example, would be benefited in his own craft by knowing the "good itself," or how the knowledge of the Idea itself would help one become a better doctor. Actually, the doctor does not study "health as such" but the health of men, and he practices his profession not on "man as such" but on individual men.³³ Thus, Plato's good cannot be the good that man is seeking; it cannot give man happiness or serve as a norm or standard for man and society.

Having thus considered the popular opinions as well as the Platonic view on the good, Aristotle proceeds to give an account of his own idea of the good for man.

HAPPINESS AS THE CHIEF GOOD AND END OF HUMAN LIFE

Aristotle introduces his own theory with a teleological view on the good. He says that every pursuit, art, science, action or choice aims at some good.³⁴ Thus, *the good is an end* - "that at which all things aim."³⁵ But there is a difference in the ends aimed at: in some cases, the end is an activity; in other cases, the end is some product beyond the activity. In cases where the end lies beyond the activity, the product is naturally better than the activity.³⁶

As there are many pursuits or activities, there are also various ends. They are different for different actions or investigations: health is the end of medicine, vessel in the case of shipbuilding, victory in the case of strategy, and wealth in the case of economics.³⁷ In certain cases, several pursuits fall under a single capacity, and others are grouped under other capacities. For example, the act of bridle-making and all other acts pertaining to the equipment of a horse are grouped under horsemanship, while every military activity falls under strategy. In these cases, the ends of the particular activities are subordinate to the specific end of the art or science. Or, the ends of the specific activities of the person are subordinate to the object of the whole pursuit of his life. Aristotle, therefore, distinguishes between ends which are sought for the sake of other ends and ends which are desired for their own sake. If there exists an end in the realism of action which is the object of all

³³NE, I, 6, 1097all.

³⁴NE, I, 1, 1094a1-2; I, 4, 1095as3.

³⁵NE, I, 1, 1094a3.

³⁶NE, I, 1, 1094a9.

³⁷NE, I, 1, 1094a7; I, 7, 1097a15.

our pursuits, is desired for its own sake, and determines all our other desires or activities, then this end must be the *chief good* or the *highest good*.³⁸

Those which are not ends in themselves but sought for the sake of other ends are properly referred to as *means*. They are not final ends and the good they attain is not the highest good. But the end which is pursued for its own sake can be regarded as a *final end*. This is the case with pleasure, honor, intelligence, or reason: pleasure is the goal of all the activities of a man like Don Juan; honor is the aim of the whole life of a politician or a statesman; intelligence is the aim of the scholar. These ends or goods are ends in themselves. Yet, they cannot be taken as the most final end; they can be regarded as means for something more final, and that is happiness. Whereas pleasure, honor, intelligence or virtue is sought in order to be happy, no one chooses happiness for the sake of any of the goods cited.³⁹ Thus we can say that happiness is the end of all that we do or the goal of human life itself - it is the *most final of all ends*, it is desired as an end in itself, and never as a means to something else. Hence, it is referred to as the end in an unqualified sense.⁴⁰ For Aristotle, happiness is the *real final end of man* and constitutes the chief good in his life.⁴¹

We will arrive at the same idea concerning happiness when we approach the question on the good for man from the standpoint of *self-sufficiency*. Self-sufficiency, according to Aristotle, does not apply to the man who lives by himself in isolation from others, but to those men who live their lives in association with others, i.e., the parents, children, friends and fellow citizens. Man is born for social and political life and must realize himself by relating with others in society. But he must, of course, set limits to his relations. For if they included those with ancestors and descendants or the friends of his friends, then his relations would go in an infinite series.⁴²

Aristotle says that "self-sufficient" specifically refers to the one thing most desirable that makes one's life deficient in nothing once attained.⁴³ Such is the case with happiness; it is the most desired of all things, but it is not to be counted as one good among others. For if it were so considered, the addition of other goods would make it a greater good and more desirable, since the greater goods are more desirable than the lesser ones. This would imply the dependence of happiness on other goods to make it a greater good and consequently more desirable. But that would be denying the essential character of happiness as something final, self-sufficient, and the end of all of one's actions.⁴⁴

³⁸NE, I, 1, 1094a10ff; I, 2, 1094a18.

³⁹NE, I, 7, 1097a24ff.

⁴⁰NE, I, 7, 1097a 34.

⁴¹NE, I, 7, 1097a1.

⁴²NE, I, 7, 1097b7ff.

⁴³NE, I, 7, 1097b15.

⁴⁴NE, I, 7, 1097b22.

Aristotle further clarifies his account of happiness as the chief good by relating it with the *function of man*. To Aristotle's mind, all things have specific functions or activities, and the "good" resides in the performance of these specific functions or activities. The fluteplayer, for instance, has a function different from that of the sculptor, or any expert for that matter. Man, too, has a function. Just as the eye, hand, foot and every other member of the body have functions, man also has a function apart from all these; it is a function peculiar to man as man.⁴⁵ To determine what this function is, we need to know the *nature and powers of the soul*.

For Aristotle, an assured knowledge of the soul is one of the most difficult things in the world. Nevertheless, the study of the soul ought to be pursued and prized since it is necessary for the advancement of truth about Nature.⁴⁶ For our purpose in this paper, however, we need only to point out some essential facts concerning man's soul.

Aristotle thinks that the soul is characterized by certain powers that enable it to perform certain activities.⁴⁷ It has two elements - one is irrational and the other rational. Of the irrational element, one part in common to all living things vegetative in nature and has no share in reason at all; this is responsible for nurture and growth.⁴⁸

There is another irrational element in the soul which, in a sense shares in a rational principle. This is the seat of the appetites and of desires in general, and partakes of reason in so far as it complies with reason and accepts its guidance. It possesses reason in the sense in which we say that it is "reasonable" to take account of the advice of one's father or friend, not in the sense that we have a "rational" understanding of a mathematical proposition.⁴⁹ If this appetitive element can be said to share in the rational principle, it follows that the rational element will be twofold: one possesses reason in the strict sense of having it in itself, and the other possesses reason in the sense that it listens to and obeys it as one is open to his father's advice.⁵⁰

Now, which of the functions of the soul is most peculiar to man? This function cannot be the life of nutrition and growth which he also shares with the plants, nor is it the life of perception which man shares with other animals. The distinctively human function is the life of the rational element or principle.⁵¹ This is taken more properly in the sense of activity. The *function peculiar to man* is "an activity of the soul which follows or implies a rational principle," i.e., an activity regulated by *reason*. The function of the

⁴⁵NE, I, 7, 1097b23ff.

⁴⁶On the Soul, I, I, 402a4ff.

⁴⁷On the Soul, II, 2, 413b10.

⁴⁸NE, I, 13, 1102a28ff.

⁴⁹NE, I, 13, 1102b30.

⁵⁰NE, I, 13, 1102b33.

⁵¹NE, I, 7, 1097b29ff.

good man is the good, noble, and excellent performance of the activities regulated by reason.⁵² And this *excellent performance* is essential to what is regarded as a *virtuous activity*.

The man who organizes his activities according to a rational principle is doing well and living well. He lives the good life which is a happy life that leaves him with no desires for anything else but the happiness he enjoys. In his life we recognize the self-sufficiency of happiness as the final end of human life. The same thing cannot be seen in the pursuits of a man whose whole life is not regulated by reason but directed towards such ends as pleasure, wealth, power and honor. These goods are not self-sufficient and the attainment of any of them still leaves man desiring for something more, better or nobler.

Thus, for Aristotle, *happiness* is the *chief good* of man. It consists essentially in the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete, in a complete life.⁵³ He adds that the good, noble and excellent performance of man's function must be viewed as a lifetime task, for "one swallow does not make a summer." Likewise, doing one good thing in one occasion, in a day or in a short time, is not enough to make a man blessed and happy.⁵⁴

What has just been presented was a sketch of Aristotle's theory of the good for man. Its details may be articulated later. Aristotle himself thinks that to develop and complete a theory, time is necessary. Precision must be appropriate to the subject matter, and Aristotle thinks that the fine, just and noble actions which we are trying to examine are open to much variety and irregularity that some people think they exist only "by convention" and not "by nature."⁵⁵ However, Aristotle considers the outline of his theory as a good beginning; it actually comprises "more than half of the whole" and offers clarifications concerning many of our questions on the good.⁵⁶

Suggesting somehow a coherent view of truth, Aristotle thinks that in a true statement all the facts are in harmony and consistent with all the other facts. But in a false one, facts conflict with other facts and introduce a discordant note in the theory.⁵⁷ Aristotle judges that his conception of the good for man is sound not only on the basis of the logical coherence of the elements which make up its definition but also on the basis of its harmony with the views commonly held about it.

Citing a generally accepted view, Aristotle says that goods are commonly divided into three: the external goods, the goods of the body and the goods of

⁵²NE, I, 7, 1098a14.

⁵³NE, I, 7, 1098a15ff.

⁵⁴NE, I, 7, 1098a17ff.

⁵⁵NE, I, 3, 1094b16.

⁵⁶NE, I, 7, 1098b6.

⁵⁷NE, I, 8, 1098b11; X, 8, 1179a21.

the soul. The ones pertaining to the soul are considered as good "properly" and "truly."⁵⁸ Now, the physical activities are related to the soul; so, virtuous activities which bring happiness and constitute the good for man fall under the goods of the soul. This implies that Aristotle's definition of the human good agrees with the commonly held view that the goods of the soul are goods in the highest and fullest sense.⁵⁹ Likewise, his account of the human good or happiness as a kind of good life or good action is in harmony with the popular idea that a happy man does well and lives well.⁶⁰

There are people who say that *happiness* is virtue - practical or philosophic wisdom; that it is both of these accompanied or not by pleasure; or that it includes external property. All these are held by men in authority as well as by prominent persons. To Aristotle's mind, these are not totally erroneous views. And he says that somehow they are not totally erroneous views. And he says that somehow they are considered in his definition of happiness.⁶¹

Furthermore, Aristotle says that his account particularly confirms the idea that happiness is virtue because to virtue belongs the virtuous activities.⁶² However, he stresses that happiness as the highest good for man does not consist simply in having a state of character or in the mere possession of virtue, but in the activities that manifest these states. Aristotle says that a characteristic may exist without producing a good result. This is the case with a man who is asleep or inactive. But activity produces results, and the active person necessarily acts and acts well. Using an analogy, Aristotle says that in Olympic games the most beautiful and the strongest are not necessarily the ones who get the crown or awards, but those who participate and compete in the games. In the same manner, the good and noble things in life are attained by those who act rightly and virtuously.⁶³

The life of men who are active in the sense describe above is in itself a pleasant life. Pleasure is a state of the soul and each man derives pleasures from what he loves: houses are pleasant to the lover of houses, or a spectacle to the lover of sights, or just and virtuous activities to the lover of justice and virtue.⁶⁴

In most men, the pleasant acts are in conflict with each other because according to Aristotle their acts are not pleasant by nature. But those who love what is good and noble in themselves, find pleasure from something that is naturally pleasant. Virtuous actions are not only pleasant for the man who

⁵⁸NE, I, 8, 1098b14.

⁵⁹NE, I, 8, 1098b19.

⁶⁰NE, I, 8, 1098b20ff.

⁶¹NE, I, 8, 1098b24ff.

⁶²NE, I, 8, 1098b30.

⁶³NE, I, 8, 1099a3.

⁶⁴NE, I, 8, 1099a7.

love them but are also pleasant by their nature.⁶⁵ Virtuous men have no need of something to give them pleasure that might be called adventitious since their virtuous activities are in themselves a source of pleasure. Such actions are also good and noble to the highest degree. Happiness, then, is the best, noblest and most pleasant thing. These attributes are not in separate things as the inscription at Delos puts it, but are perceived altogether by Aristotle in *happiness* which is the *final, self-sufficient end of human life*.⁶⁶

Aristotle thinks that to obtain happiness, *external goods* such as good birth, good appearance, good children and good friends are necessary. A minimum essential of these "fortunes" is required for one to perform noble actions. It is for this reason that some identify happiness with "good fortune."⁶⁷

As a final note on his preliminary definition of happiness, Aristotle raises the question that since virtuous activities must be performed in a lifetime, can one be called truly happy when he sometimes encounters evils and misfortunes in the course of life? Or should we call one happy only when he is dead?⁶⁸ In response to this question Aristotle reiterates that virtuous activities constitute happiness and their opposites bring unhappiness. Activities are what gives life its character. So, no good man can become miserable since he will never do acts that are hateful and mean. In the course of his lifetime one may encounter success and failure, fortune and misfortune. But the truly virtuous man will always bear these life experiences with dignity and make the best out of the circumstances, just as the good general makes the best military use of the army at his command, or the good shoemaker makes the best shoes out of the materials available to him.⁶⁹

A truly virtuous and happy man will never become miserable; he will not be fickle and changeable. He will not be easily moved from his happy state by ordinary misfortunes or petty failures. Perhaps the many great disasters will disturb his happy state and would not allow him to recover immediately. If he does become happy again it will be after a long time; but then he shall have gained for himself great successes in building a strong character. In the light of what has been said, we can say that, for Aristotle, the happy man is one who acts in accordance with complete virtue and is sufficiently equipped with at least the minimum essentials of external goods, not simply at a given moment or in a short period but all throughout his life. He considers happy those men who continually fulfill to the end of their life these requirements expressed in his definition of happiness.⁷⁰

⁶⁵NE, I, 8, 1099a12.

⁶⁶NE, I, 8, 1099a24ff.

⁶⁷NE, I, 8, 1099a24ff.

⁶⁸NE, I, 10, 1100a10ff.

⁶⁹NE, I, 10, 1100b34ff.

⁷⁰NE, I, 12, 1101a19.

Aristotle also considers the question whether happiness is to be praised or prized. In this connection he says that praise is bestowed on something because of its quality or its relation to something good and important. For example, we praise just or brave actions and achievements. We also praise a strong man or a good runner because he possesses a natural quality and stands in a relation to something good or worthwhile. But if praise is accorded to the things cited above, which all stand in a relation to something else, it is clear that what applies to the best things is not praise but something greater and better. We do recognize this, for we call the gods and the most godlike of men "blessed" and "happy"; and we perceive this also in the case of good things - we speak of happiness as *blessedness*, something better and more divine.⁷¹

As the highest good, *happiness* is something worthy of being *prized* and regarded as almost *divine*. We would consider it even more worthy of being prized when we realize that it is the first principle and cause of all goods since we do all that we do for the sake of this final end or highest good. All other goods are either necessary conditions for happiness or are naturally co-operative and useful as instruments for attaining it.⁷²

If happiness is the highest good and the final end of life, how does one acquire it? Is it something that comes as a gift from the gods or does it happen by chance? Is it acquired by learning, habituation or by some kind of training?

As a preliminary answer to the question Aristotle says that it is not right and reasonable to attribute to the work of chance the attainment of happiness which is the noblest and greatest of all human goods. It would be more plausible to suppose that happiness is god-given since of all things human it is the best and most divine. However, it is not god-sent but comes as a result of virtue and some process of learning and training, it is still appropriate to regard it as something good and blessed.

A more definite answer to the question concerning the manner of attaining happiness is given by Aristotle in his treatment of the nature of virtuous activities which are essential to the happy or blessed life.⁷³ This will be considered in the following discussion.

VIRTUOUS ACTIVITIES AS THE ESSENCE OF HAPPINESS

Aristotle defines *happiness* as the activity of the soul in conformity with *perfect virtue*. In order to understand better what this means, we must inquire into the *nature of a virtuous activity*.

First of all, a virtuous act is one that is done by man as a *responsible agent*. This implies that it is essentially a *voluntary* action. As opposed to the

⁷¹NE, I, 12, 1101b25.

⁷²NE, I, 9, 1099b27.

⁷³NE, I, 7, 1098a15; I, 9, 1099b8ff.

involuntary act which is done under compulsion or by reason of ignorance, the voluntary act has its moving principle in the agent himself. Hence, a person who acts voluntarily is aware of the circumstances surrounding the act and he assumes responsibility for it. His action is either praiseworthy or blameworthy.⁷⁴

Secondly, a virtuous act is the result of a *choice*. As act of choice is voluntary but not every voluntary action is an act of choice; the latter involves reason and thought or deliberation while the former may be an act done on the spur of the moment.⁷⁵ Choice results from a process of deliberation and its very name suggests that it is what is chosen before other things.⁷⁶

Since virtuous actions are voluntary, deliberated upon, and chosen, virtue or excellence depends on ourselves; it is within our power to act in a noble or vulgar manner; it depends on us whether we want to be a decent or a worthless individual, to be virtuous or vicious.⁷⁷

Aristotle recognizes two different kinds of virtues - the *intellectual* and *moral* virtues.⁷⁸ The former owe their origin and development to teaching. For this reason, they require experience and time. The moral virtues, on their part, are not innate in us; there are no special excellences endowed at birth. But although moral virtues are not implanted in us by nature, they are not opposed to nature. For we are equipped with the ability to acquire and receive them. This capability is brought to perfection and fulfillment by habit, i.e., by repeatedly doing something well. We learn to do things by actually doing them. Just as one become a builder by building, or a lyre player by playing the lyre, so too we acquire virtues by actually doing virtuous acts. We become just by doing just acts, temperate by exercising self-control, and courageous by performing acts of courage.⁷⁹ Recognizing this, the state aims at making the citizens good through its constitution and institutions; its legislators seek to cultivate good habits in the citizens.⁸⁰

Thus, for Aristotle, *moral virtues* come as a result of habit, i.e., by repeatedly acting well; in the same manner, vices are acquired by repeatedly acting badly. It is from the repeated performance of similar acts that a habit is formed and a state of character is acquired. The state of character in turn creates in the subject a more or less permanent disposition to act in a certain manner - virtuously or viciously. It is, therefore, important to see to it that acts of the right kind are done from the very start, for according as they are good or bad, so will the habit be good or bad.⁸¹

⁷⁴NE, III, 1, 1109b30ff; 1111a20ff.

⁷⁵NE, III, 2, 1111b6ff.

⁷⁶NE, III, 3, 1112b15ff.

⁷⁷NE, III, 5, 1113b5ff; II, 4, 1105a31.

⁷⁸NE, II, 1, 1103a14.

⁷⁹NE, II, 1, 1103a19ff.

⁸⁰NE, II, 1, 1103b4.

⁸¹NE, II, 1, 1103b20ff.

Aristotle says that we can take as a sign of states of character the pleasure or pain that attends to the performance of certain acts. For example, a man who abstains from bodily pleasures and takes delight in doing this is temperate or self-controlled; but if one finds abstinence annoying, then he is self-indulgent or intemperate. Or he who faces danger with joy is brave, while he who endures it with pain is a coward. Moral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains. Aristotle advances certain reasons to support this relation between virtue and pleasure or pain.

First of all, it is pleasure that tempts us to evil and it is pain that keeps us from doing something noble.⁸² Echoing Plato, Aristotle says that one must be habituated from youth to take pleasure and pain in the right things; this is an essential part of true education.⁸³

Aristotle goes on to say that since virtues have to do with actions and passions which are accompanied by pleasure and pain, we can say that the field of moral virtue has to do also with pleasures and pain.⁸⁴

Aristotle also thinks that it is the nature of cure to be effected by its opposite. So, the pleasure of wrong doing will be corrected by applying punishment and this is done by inflicting pain. To avoid punishment or pain, one refrains from doing what is bad and resolves to do what is virtuous.⁸⁵

Every state of the soul, Aristotle continues, shows its true nature in its relation to those things that tend to make it better or worse. Sometimes because of pleasure and pain, men are corrupted: either they pursue pleasure or they avoid pain of the wrong kind, at the wrong time or in the wrong number. For this reason, some people define virtue as a certain state of impassivity and rest, or insensibility to the influence of pleasure or pain. But this is, of course, not entirely true. On the basis of what has been said concerning virtue, it would be better to say that moral virtue or excellence inclines one to act in the best way with respect to pleasure and pain. Vice, on its part, makes us do the opposite.⁸⁶

Aristotle further explains the relation of virtue to pleasure and pain by showing that there are three objects of choice - the noble, the advantageous and the pleasant; there are also three objects of aversion - the base, the injurious and the painful. With respect to any of these, the good man will tend to go right and the bad man will go wrong especially in the case of pleasure. The reason is not only because it is something in our nature which we share with the animals, but also because even the pursuit of distinctively human objects such as the noble and the advantageous are accompanied by pleasure.⁸⁷

⁸²NE, II, 3, 1104b8ff.

⁸³NE, II, 3, 1104b13.

⁸⁴NE, II, 3, 1104b14.

⁸⁵NE, II, 3, 1104b16.

⁸⁶NE, II, 3, 1104b19ff.

⁸⁷NE, II, 3, 1104b30ff.

It was also pointed out by Aristotle that we have grown up from infancy with a liking for pleasure. As a result, we have difficulty in rubbing it out or uprooting it. Moreover, we measure our feelings and actions by the rule of pleasure and pain. Thus, it is really very important for the individual to take delight in the right pleasure and to avoid pain that is not beneficial in any way at all.⁸⁸

Using Heraclitus' words, Aristotle finally says that it is more difficult to fight pleasure than anger; but, both art and virtue are concerned with what is difficult, and the good turns out to be even better when it is harder to achieve. Thus, the study of virtue must be concerned with pleasure and pain: a man who has the right attitude to these will become good and the one who does not have the proper attitude will become bad.⁸⁹

To summarize what Aristotle has said so far concerning virtue, the following points are stressed: virtue has to do with pleasures and pains; the actions from which virtue arises also develop and cultivate it. But when these actions are differently performed they fall into the opposite view; the acquired virtue or vice actualizes itself fully in the continued performance of the good or bad activities in which it originated.⁹⁰

At this point we may bring in a *paradox* concerning virtue which Aristotle himself was aware of. It was stressed that we must do just acts to be just, temperate acts to be temperate; in general, we must do the good acts to become good. But for one to do just or temperate acts, one must first be just or temperate. To be able to do good acts, one must already be good. This appears to be also the case in the arts: if a man practices music, he must be a musician; if he writes correctly, he surely can write. Aristotle, however, explains that this is not really the case even in the arts. It is possible for one to write a piece correctly by chance or at the suggestion of another; but a man will be a grammarian only when he does something grammatically and does it also in accordance with the knowledge of grammar which he possesses.⁹¹

Furthermore, the case in the arts is not really the same as that of virtue. For the products of the arts have goodness or excellence in themselves, and it is enough that they should have a certain character. But in the case of virtue, it is not enough that the just or temperate acts, for example, be of a certain character. The agent must also be in a certain condition when he performs virtuous acts: first of all, he must have knowledge; secondly, he must choose the act and choose it for its own sake; thirdly, his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character. Of these three conditions, only the first one, i.e., knowledge of what is about, must be present in the mastery of a craft or art. But as far as the mastery of virtue is concerned, actions must be done as the virtuous man would do them. If one does what is

⁸⁸NE, II, 3, 1105a5.

⁸⁹NE, II, 3, 1105a8ff.

⁹⁰NE, II, 3, 1105a13ff.

⁹¹NE, II, 4, 1105a18ff.

just or temperate, he is not necessarily a just or temperate man; he is said to be so only when he does this as the just or temperate man would do the same act.⁹² Here, Aristotle points out that a completely virtuous action is the right thing one is expected to do in a given situation; it is done in the right manner and proceeds from a good motive. Aristotle also distinguishes here between acts that create and those that proceed from a good disposition. When one is still in the process of acquiring good habits, his good actions create a disposition; but once the disposition is there, virtuous acts are performed in a manner that only virtuous men do. In doing a virtuous act, what matters is not so much the resulting act but the manner in which it is done.

One becomes virtuous by doing good acts as virtuous men perform them. No one would ever have the chance of becoming good unless he acts in the manner just specified. If one merely knows what virtue is or simply talks about it, he would be like a patient who listens attentively to what his doctor says but does not act on the prescription.⁹³ As opposed to the Socratic-Platonic view that virtue is knowledge, Aristotle's idea of virtue essentially involves activity.

But what sort of activity is virtue? To answer this question, Aristotle first of all says that *virtue* must be considered as *activity of the soul*. But three things are found in the soul: feelings or passions, faculties, and habits or states of character. Aristotle says that virtue must be identified with one of these.

Passions include appetite, anger, fear and all feelings in general which are accompanied by pleasure or pain. Faculties are those in virtue of which we are said to be capable of having those feelings. The states of character or habits are the relations or dispositions - either good or bad - which we have with respect to the various feelings. For example, if we are disposed violently or too weakly toward anger, then we have a bad habit; but if we are disposed moderately, then we have a good habit.⁹⁴

Virtues or vices are not feelings because we are not good or bad on the basis of feelings; we experience feelings without choosing them, and we are not praised or blamed for them. But virtues and vices involve a choice; we are considered good or bad and we are praised or blamed because of these.

Neither are virtues faculties. One does not praise or blame us, or consider us good or bad simply because we have the capacity for feeling. Besides, it is our nature to have certain capacities. But as pointed out earlier, we are not made good or bad by nature.

Since *virtues* are *neither feelings nor faculties*, they must be *habits or states of character*.⁹⁵ But what sort of habit or character is a virtue? In

⁹²NE, II, 4, 1105a27ff.

⁹³NE, II, 4, 1105b13.

⁹⁴NE, II, 5, 1105b22ff.

⁹⁵NE, II, 5, 1106a9.

answering the question raised and completing his definition of virtue, Aristotle first points out that virtue or excellence gives perfection to the thing itself of which it is the excellence and causes that thing to perform its function well. For example, the excellence of the eye makes both the eye and its function good. Likewise, the virtue of a man will be the state of character which makes him good and enables him to do his work well.⁹⁶ More specifically, Aristotle says that virtue lies in the *mean*. He hinted at this when he said that certain things are destroyed by excess and defect, but preserved by the mean.⁹⁷ In considering the specific nature of virtue as involving the mean, Aristotle explains what is meant by absolute and relative mean.

Aristotle says that in anything that is continuous and divisible, it is possible to take an amount more, less, or equal to the part which is left. Here, "equal" is an intermediate between excess and defect. By the intermediate is meant that which is equidistant from each of the extremes; this is the "absolute mean" which is the same for all. For example, if ten are many and two are few, then six would be the mean in relation to the entity; but this is the mean according to arithmetical proportions. However, the "relative mean" or "mean for us" cannot be determined in this way. So, if ten pounds of food, for example, are too much while two pounds are too little for an athlete, it does not follow necessarily that the arithmetical mean of six pounds would be just enough for the athlete. Whatever amount between the two extremes suits the person is the "mean for him" and will be prescribed by the trainer.⁹⁸

The rule which the trainer observes is that which any master of art follows - to avoid excess or defect and to seek only that which is just enough - i.e., the mean not of the object but the *mean relative to us*. If every artist achieves excellence in his work by following the standard of the mean, much more carefully should this be observed to acquire a virtuous character, for the latter is more beautiful and more noble than any work of art.⁹⁹ The crafting of the good life is the noblest of all arts.

When Aristotle says that virtue must observe the mean, he makes reference to moral virtue which is related to feelings and actions that can admit of excesses and defects.¹⁰⁰ We can have too much or too little of certain feelings or emotions; in either case we do not stand in a proper or a good relation with them. For to have the feelings at the right time with respect to the right objects, towards the right person, with the right motive, and in the right way, is both the intermediate and the best course and the distinctive mark of virtue.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶NE, II, 6, 1106a15ff.

⁹⁷NE, II, 2, 1104a11.

⁹⁸NE, II, 6, 1106a25-1106b7.

⁹⁹NE, II, 6, 1106b8ff.

¹⁰⁰NE, II, 6, 1106b16ff.

¹⁰¹NE, II, 6, 1106b20ff.

Similarly, there can be an excess, a defect or a mean with regard to our actions. But with respect to both emotions and actions, excess and defect miss the mark while the mean is praised and regarded as a form of success. Now, virtue aims at the intermediate and is, therefore, a kind of mean. Consequently, both praise and success are marks of virtue or excellence.¹⁰²

There are then three dispositions with respect to a feeling or an action: two are vices and one is a virtue. While there are many ways of going wrong - being in excess or in defect, there is only one way of going right, i.e., to hit off the mean. It is easy to miss the mark, but it is difficult to hit off the mean. It is for this reason that good conduct is rare, praiseworthy and noble.¹⁰³

Not every feeling or action, however, admits of a mean. This is the case with the feelings of spite, shamelessness and envy or the acts of adultery, theft and murder. They are in themselves bad and doing them in any way is never right.¹⁰⁴ There can be no excess and deficiency of temperance or courage or any virtue for that matter. Likewise, in the case of what is always wrong, there is no mean nor excess and deficiency. In general, there is no mean in excess and deficiency as there is no excess and deficiency in the mean.¹⁰⁵

But how does one determine the mean or arrive at an insight into what is intermediate? Aristotle says that the mean relative to us is determined by a *rational principle* or by the *rule of right reason*. This principle is also referred to as *practical wisdom* or *prudence*. The man of practical wisdom or prudence takes right reason as his guide in determining the mean. His decision concerning the mean or the virtuous act that is appropriate to a particular situation is made in the light of his vision of the noble or good life which he himself comes to discover through reflection or recognize in some men who are models of conduct in a certain community.

To Aristotle, then, *virtue* is "a state of character concerned with choice, lying in the 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."¹⁰⁶

I shall not include in this paper an enumeration or examination of the particular moral virtues cataloged by Aristotle in his ethical treatise. However, I think it is important to treat briefly of the intellectual virtues in order to gain a fuller understanding of Aristotle's idea of virtuous activities.

For Aristotle, moral virtue is not complete in itself. Its definition involves reference to an intellectual virtue - that of practical wisdom which enables one to determine the right rule that must be followed in order to

¹⁰²NE, II, 6, 1106b24ff.

¹⁰³NE, II, 6, 1107a23ff.

¹⁰⁴NE, II, 6, 1107a8ff.

¹⁰⁵NE, II, 6, 1107a23.

¹⁰⁶NE, II, 6, 1107a1ff.

perform the virtuous act which aims at the mean between extremes.¹⁰⁷ Obedience to this right rule is moral virtue. But the framing of the rule is an intellectual operation and the work of one of the intellectual virtues. To fully understand this we need to consider what Aristotle regards as the *virtues of the intellect*.

As pointed out earlier, there are two parts of the soul.¹⁰⁸ There is the rational part which grasps a rule or a rational principle. There is also the irrational part which has two principles: the vegetative principle which does not participate in reason at all, and the appetitive principle which does participate in reason in the sense of listening to or obeying it as a child follows his father's direction.¹⁰⁹

The preceding division of the soul underlies the classification of the virtues into those of the intellect which pertain to that part which has reason in itself, and those of the moral character which pertain to the appetitive part that is supposed to be governed by reason.

Now, the rational part of the soul has two faculties - the *scientific* and the *calculative*. It is by means of the first one that we apprehend necessary truths and perceive objects whose fundamental principles are necessary and cannot be other than what they are. It is by means of the second one that we deliberate or calculate and thereby apprehend contingent truths of perceived objects which can be other than what they are. The object of both rational faculties is truth. And that state which makes each of these attain the truth will be the virtue of the two parts. Or the best function of each of these two parts or faculties constitutes the virtue or excellence of each.¹¹⁰

There are, however, five ways in which the soul attains truth: through intuitive reason, scientific knowledge, art (applied science), practical wisdom (prudence), and theoretical wisdom (philosophy).

Intuitive reason enables us to grasp the truths which cannot be demonstrated by a syllogism. These truths are the first or fundamental principles which are the starting points of any scientific investigation.¹¹¹

Through *scientific knowledge* (science) we come to know the truth of objects that exist of necessity and are consequently eternal, ungenerated, imperishable, and cannot be otherwise. Science proceeds by induction or by syllogism; it can be taught and its object can be learned.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷NE, See preceding quotation.

¹⁰⁸Above, 12.

¹⁰⁹NE, I, 13, 1102a28ff.

¹¹⁰NE, VI, 1, 1139a7-15.

¹¹¹NE, VI, 6, 1140b31-1141a7.

¹¹²NE, VI, 3, 1139b18ff.

Theoretical wisdom (philosophy) is the most perfect form of knowledge. The wise man not only apprehends the truth of the first principles but also has true knowledge of all that follows from these fundamental principles.¹¹³ Philosophic wisdom thus includes both intuitive reason and scientific knowledge. It is the crown of science, the grasp of principles and the knowledge of results in the highest spheres.¹¹⁴ It is the knowledge of the things that are "highest by nature" - the things whose nature is much more divine than man's nature - e.g., the bodies of which the heavens are framed.¹¹⁵ Aristotle says that philosophers like Thales and Anaxagoras have philosophic wisdom, they know things which are remarkable, admirable, difficult and divine.

Art or applied science refers to the habit of reasoning truly where the making or production of something is concerned. It deals neither with things that are or come to be by necessity, nor with things produced by nature; it is concerned with the realm of coming-to-be, with something whose origin is in the maker and not in the things made.¹¹⁶

Practical wisdom is a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regards to human goods.¹¹⁷ The man with practical wisdom or prudence deliberates well about what would contribute to the good life. He is concerned with human affairs and with matters about which deliberation is possible. For no one deliberates about things invariable or impossible for him to do.¹¹⁸ In an unqualified sense, that man is good at deliberating who, by reasoning, can aim at and hit the best thing attainable by man through action.

Practical wisdom is *excellence in deliberation* about what is good for life in general. But what does excellence in deliberation mean? It is not scientific knowledge, for one does not inquire about what he already knows; but good deliberation is a form of deliberation in which one is engaged in investigating and calculating something that is not yet decided upon. Deliberation takes time; so it is not skill in questioning which is done spontaneously without reasoning. Neither is it readiness of mind or opinion; it is rather right thinking and correctness in assessing what is conducive to the end of which practical wisdom gives a true conviction.¹¹⁹

Practical wisdom and *understanding* deal with objects in the same sphere, i.e., the things which may become subjects of questioning and deliberation. But they are not the same. Practical wisdom issues commands and its end is what ought to be done or what ought not to be done.

¹¹³NE, VI, 7, 1141a8ff.

¹¹⁴NE, VI, 7, 1141a18ff.

¹¹⁵NE, VI, 7, 1141b1.

¹¹⁶NE, VI, 5, 1140b1ff.

¹¹⁷NE, VI, 5, 1140b19.

¹¹⁸NE, VI, 5, 1140a28ff.

¹¹⁹NE, VI, 9, 1142b1ff.

Understanding, on its part, merely passes judgments; it is neither the possession nor the acquisition of practical wisdom but right judgment on another person's statements concerning matters within the province of practical wisdom.¹²⁰

The man with practical wisdom as well as understanding also has *good* or sympathetic judgment which is understood as correct sense or discrimination of what is fair. What all these three have in common is their concern with ultimate particular facts, things to be done or matters of action.¹²¹

Men of practical wisdom are sometimes referred to as *clever*. Cleverness is the ability to hit upon the means towards an end we have set up before ourselves; if the end is noble, cleverness is laudable, otherwise it is simply smartness. But this capacity is not necessarily practical wisdom, though the latter cannot exist without it.¹²²

Now, as practical wisdom is related to cleverness, so is moral virtue related to *natural virtues*. Aristotle thinks that there is such a thing as natural virtue. Man is born with natural dispositions to such moral qualities as self-control, bravery and others. Without reason or intelligence, however, these natural virtues are blind. Guided by the "right rule" which is determined by practical wisdom, these natural virtues settle into habits and become virtues in the strict sense. Referring to the Socratic view that virtue is knowledge, Aristotle comments that it is wrong to take moral virtues as forms of practical wisdom but it is right to say that they imply practical wisdom.¹²³

It is clear that, for Aristotle, it is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom or to be practically wise without moral virtue.¹²⁴ This implies also that virtues do not exist in separation from each other; this may be the case with the natural virtues but not with the moral virtues which make man good in an unqualified sense. In the latter case, to possess the single virtue of practical wisdom is to possess also the rest of the moral virtues.¹²⁵

At this point, I would like to bring in certain questions or difficulties raised by Aristotle concerning the usefulness of the two excellences - *philosophic* and *practical wisdom*. First of all, it seems that philosophic wisdom is useless because it is concerned not with those that are contingent or that come into being, but with unchanging realities which are not human goods that will make a man happy. Practical wisdom, on its part, considers

¹²⁰NE, VI, 10, 1143a5ff.

¹²¹NE, VI, 11, 1144a28.

¹²²NE, VI, 12, 1144a24-29.

¹²³NE, VI, 13, 1144b16ff.

¹²⁴NE, VI, 13, 1144b30.

¹²⁵NE, VI, 13, 1145a1ff.

those things that are a means to happiness; it tells us what are just, good, and noble for man. However, just as we are none the better able to act for knowing the art of medicine or gymnastics, knowing what is just, good or noble does not necessarily enhance the ability to perform actions that result in a virtuous state of character.¹²⁶

Secondly, if we say that the purpose of practical wisdom is not merely to know that something is just, good and noble but also to acquire all these, then it would have no use at all to those who are already good. Neither would it be useful to those who are not good. It makes no difference whether they have practical wisdom themselves or obey others who have it. They could do what they do in the case of health - to be healthy they don't have to acquire the art of medicine; they need simply to consult a doctor.¹²⁷

Lastly, if practical wisdom rules and issues commands to enable one to attain happiness, this implies that it has authority over theoretical wisdom which is supposedly superior to practical wisdom.¹²⁸

In response to the objections raised, Aristotle first of all says that both practical and theoretical wisdom are virtues of the different parts of the soul and are in themselves worth acquiring even if they do not produce anything.

Secondly, Aristotle claims that they do produce something, not as medicine produces health but as health itself makes one happy. When acquired and actualized, philosophic wisdom makes a man happy, for happiness consists in virtuous activities.¹²⁹

Thirdly, man does his work well only when this work is done in accordance with practical wisdom and moral virtue. Virtue makes us aim at the right mark and practical wisdom makes us take the right means.¹³⁰

Fourthly, in answer to the objection that we are none the better able to act by merely knowing what is just, good and noble, Aristotle says that we need to take another look at the nature of the good act. What appears as good may be done under external powers or from ignorance or on the basis of evil intentions. But an act is really good when done by a good man who deliberately chooses it because it is a good act and it enables him to attain a certain end. Virtue makes us choose the right end; but hitting the right means to the end is the work of another faculty. This faculty is cleverness which, as earlier pointed out, cannot exist without practical wisdom.¹³¹

¹²⁶NE, VI, 12, 1143b16ff.

¹²⁷NE, VI, 12, 1143b28ff.

¹²⁸NE, VI, 12, 1143b33ff.

¹²⁹NE, VI, 12, 1143aff.

¹³⁰NE, VI, 12, 1144a6ff.

¹³¹NE, VI, 12, 1144a24ff.

But man does not acquire the character of practical wisdom without virtue or excellence. Only a good man can judge correctly what is the right end; wickedness perverts us and deceives us about the starting points of action. Hence, we say that a man cannot be practically wise without being good.¹³²

Finally, practical wisdom is not supreme over philosophic wisdom which is the superior part in us, anymore than the art of medicine is over health. Practical wisdom does not use but ensure philosophic wisdom. It does not command but issues orders for theoretical wisdom. To say that practical wisdom has authority over theoretical wisdom is tantamount to saying that the art of governing men rules the gods since it issues commands about human affairs including public worship.¹³³

To sum up the discussion in the preceding section, Aristotle recognizes the virtues or excellence of the soul: for its scientific function, there is philosophic wisdom; for the calculative function, there is practical wisdom; and for the appetite and desire, there are moral virtues. Aristotle says that happiness is activity in conformity with virtue. Since there are many virtues, happiness in the highest sense must be in accordance with the highest and most complete virtue - the virtue of the best part in us. The activity in accordance with this virtue shall secure the best and blessed life for man. The following section shall consider this kind of life in order to explain further Aristotle's idea of happiness as the highest good for man.

THE BEST LIFE FOR MAN

For Aristotle, happiness is the final and chief good of man. But happiness is not a characteristic which a person possesses when one is asleep all his life, vegetating like a plant or experiencing suffering because of a great misfortune. It is rather an activity sought for its own sake. Moreover, it must be viewed essentially as an activity in accordance with virtue. Thus, the happy life is a life of virtuous activities, i.e., of good and noble deeds.¹³⁴

If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, then *complete and perfect happiness* must be conformity with the *highest virtue* - the virtue of the best part in us. Whatever this part may be, it must be considered as the natural rule and guide in our thought of what is good, noble and divine. Whether this thing is itself divine or merely the most divine in us, its activity in accordance with excellence or virtue must constitute perfect happiness. Aristotle identifies this activity as *theoretical wisdom* or contemplation.¹³⁵

¹³²NE, VI, 12, 1144a33ff.

¹³³NE, VI, 12, 1145a7ff.

¹³⁴See preceding two sections of the paper; see also Aristotle's summary in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 6, 1176a30ff.

¹³⁵NE, X, 7, 1177a13ff.

Aristotle argues that this conception of the life of contemplation as the best and noblest life for man is consistent with what has already been said concerning the human good.

First of all, he says that his activity is the best since reason is the best part in us and its object is also the best and most valued of all knowable objects.¹³⁶

Secondly, it is the most continuous activity, for we are able to contemplate truth more continuously than we can do with other activities.

Thirdly, it is also the most pleasant of all activities; the pursuit of theoretical wisdom or philosophy offers pleasures marvelous for their purity and enduringness.

Furthermore, it is the most self-sufficient of all functions. Like the just or any other virtuous man, the wise man requires the necessities of life. But if there is adequate provision of these, a just man still needs other people in company with whom he manifests his justness; the same is the case with the temperate or brave man or anyone possessing any of the moral virtues. But the philosopher is able to contemplate truth if he is by himself; the more he is able to do, the wiser he is. Perhaps, he can do better when he thinks with other man, but still he is the most self-sufficient.¹³⁷

Also, this activity alone is loved for its own sake. We desire nothing beyond the activity of contemplating. But, in the case of the practical pursuits we gain a greater or smaller advantage apart from the activity.¹³⁸

The other practical virtues are exhibited in the performance of one's duties as a citizen, pursued in an unpleasurable manner, chosen not for their sake but directed to a certain end. Compared with these, the act of contemplation is thought to be superior and of greater worth, aims at nothing beyond itself, and has a pleasure proper to itself. This activity possesses all the attributes ascribed to the happy life - unweariness, leisureliness, self-sufficiency.¹³⁹ It follows that this activity can be the source of complete happiness for man.

However, such a life would be *more than human*; for in contemplation we live life not as human but as a being with some divine element that makes us more than human. This divine element is far above our composite nature since its activity is superior to that of our other practical moral virtues. If reason is divine, then we must not listen to those who make us mind only the human and mortal things; rather, we must make ourselves immortal and

¹³⁶NE, X, 7, 1177a20ff.

¹³⁷NE, X, 7, 1177a28-35.

¹³⁸NE, X, 7, 1177b1ff.

¹³⁹NE, X, 7, 1177b16-25.

strive to live in accordance with the best thing in us which, though only a part of us, is superior to all things in power and worth.¹⁴⁰

Reason also represents our true self since it is the authoritative part in us and it would be strange not to choose to live the life of our true self.¹⁴¹

Furthermore, in the exercise of the act of contemplation, man has *less need of external or extraneous things*. This is something that cannot be said of the exercise of the other moral virtues. The liberal man will need money to be able to perform his liberal deeds; the just man will also need it to meet his obligations; the brave man needs power to accomplish things corresponding to his virtue; the temperate man will also need opportunity to be able to manifest his temperance. But the contemplative man has no need of such things. This argues further for the *self-sufficiency* of the happiness accruing from the life of contemplation.¹⁴²

But, being a man, one also needs external goods and prosperity. His nature is not self-sufficient for the purpose of contemplation; he has a body that also needs to be attended to in order to be healthy. But we must not think that we need many of these things to be happy, for self-sufficiency and moral action do not consist in excess of these possessions. Even if we don't own and rule the earth, the sea and the sky, we can do noble acts. In fact, private individuals act more honorably than the powerful despots. If one's means are moderate, he can still act virtuously. And he who is active in the life of virtue will be happy.¹⁴³

The *complete happiness* that accompanies the contemplative activity is also shown in the following consideration. No one else is regarded as more blessed and happy than the gods who are considered alive and active. But the acts assigned to them are not those of justice, bravery, courage, temperance or generosity; it is rather the activity of contemplation. Thus, the human activity closest to this must also be the most conducive to a happy and a blessed life for man.¹⁴⁴

A man who exercises and cultivates his reason is in the best state of mind and appears to be the most dear to the gods. If the gods have any concern for human affairs, they must take delight and rejoice in man's activity guided by reason, for this is the best part in man and the thing most akin to the divine. It is also expected that the gods must reward those men who love and honor reason, care for what is dear to the gods, and act rightly and nobly. And more than any other man, it is the philosopher who possesses all these attributes. Consequently, he is closest to the gods and he is also the happiest of men. No

¹⁴⁰NE, X, 7, 1177b26ff.

¹⁴¹NE, X, 7, 1178a2ff.

¹⁴²NE, X, 8, 1178b21ff.

¹⁴³NE, X, 8, 1178b32ff.

¹⁴⁴NE, X, 8, 1178b7ff.

one but the wise man attains the highest degree of happiness possible for man.¹⁴⁵

As a final note to the discussion in this paper, it must be reiterated that for Aristotle, the knowledge of the chief good and the final end of human life will have a great influence on man's life. Thus, it is important to attain this knowledge. And the pursuit of such knowledge is the concern of the practical sciences of *ethics* and *politics*. Unlike the theoretical sciences which pursue truth for its own sake, and the productive sciences which are directed towards the making of something beautiful or useful, the practical disciplines of ethics and politics aim at the knowledge of what is good for the individual and the state.

The salient points of Aristotle's conception of the good life for man were presented in the preceding discussions. These ideas form an essential part of the whole of Aristotle's ethical theory. However, it is Aristotle's conviction that as a practical science, ethics does not merely aim at theoretical knowledge or truth concerning the good but seeks to direct man's activities and his whole life towards the highest good. Thus, it fulfills its intention not just by setting forth a theory of the good life but also in pointing out the way to live the good life and to become a morally good man.

A theory in itself does not make a man good. It may have the power to encourage and stimulate the generous-minded among our young, influence that character of the one who is well-born and a lover of what is noble, and help in creating many of the ordinary men to goodness and nobility. For most people abstain from evil acts out of fear of punishment rather than out of respect for what is good. They follow the dictates of passion, pursue their own pleasures and avoid pains opposed to them. They do not even have a notion of what is noble and truly pleasant since they have not tasted it. What theory or words can transform such people? It is difficult to remove by mere arguments the traits that are already deeply ingrained in the character of these people.¹⁴⁶

Many think that we are made good either by nature, by teaching or by habit. If goodness comes from nature, then it does not depend on us but comes as a result of some divine power on truly fortunate men. If this is the case, then it would not make sense to praise a person for doing something good or noble which does not originate from him.

Goodness would not either result from argument and teaching unless the soul of the listener has been disposed by habit to the right kind of likes and dislikes, just as land is first cultivated to be able to nourish and nurture a seed.

¹⁴⁵NE, X, 8, 1179a23-33.

¹⁴⁶NE, X, 9, 1179b1-18.

Moreover, the man who is swayed by passions does not enter into arguments and seems to yield only to force. For one to be open to teaching, his character must somehow have a kinship to virtue, loving what is noble and hating what is base.¹⁴⁷ But this would not be possible without habituating a man to virtuous actions through right training starting from youth.

At this point, Aristotle leads us *from* the sphere of ethics *to* the field of politics. It is difficult to be habituated to virtuous actions from youth unless one is brought up under right laws by the state. It is not easy and pleasant for the young to live virtuously. There is a need, then, for the state to legislate laws regulating the education and preoccupations of the young so that they will be guided in living the disciplined life of virtue. Provision must also be made by laws so that one will be habituated to virtue when he has grown up or disposed to virtuous activities for the rest of his life. Laws are necessary even for grown ups or through the whole course of men's lives, for most people often do what is right out of obedience to the law rather than out of a sense of respect for what is noble. Punishments and penalties must be imposed on those who refuse to follow the law.¹⁴⁸

When the state neglects its moral duty, each one must do what he can to help in the education of the young. In particular, the father must do his share in the moral formation of his children and friends. And he can do this better if he has some knowledge concerning legislation. Such knowledge would enable him to guide with unwritten laws those who are under his care, just as the state guides its citizens by means of its constitution and institutions.

One can learn the art of legislating from the statesman whose expertise is based not merely on thought or theory but also on the actual experiences he has in the practice of what he knows. Those who aim at a knowledge of politics can learn from the experts, but they must enrich this knowledge with experience.

The private education given by the father to the children has advantages. Children have a natural affection for the father as well as a natural disposition to obey him because of the tie of kinship and the benefits the father confers on the children. So, the injunctions and habits of the father are very influential on the members of the household.¹⁴⁹

Moreover, the father can give individual and personal attention to the children and somehow can work out in detail and with precision the training of those under his personal care and private control.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷NE, X, 9, 1179b19-31

¹⁴⁸NE, X, 9, 1179b32-1180a10.

¹⁴⁹NE, X, 9, 1180a31-1180b7.

¹⁵⁰NE, X, 9, 1180b8ff.

Aristotle thinks, however, that the system of paternal education is only the second best.¹⁵¹ It is the state that should really direct the education and moral formation of the citizen. It is the state that ordains which of the sciences should be studied and which class of citizens should learn certain things and up to what point. In particular, the legislators of the state enact laws that guide the citizens as to what they are to do and what they are to abstain from. They ensure that the citizens are given proper training from youth and habituated to perform virtuous activities and to lead noble lives.¹⁵²

An important point in Aristotle thought concerning the relation between ethics and politics will now be reiterated. And that is - for Aristotle, the practical disciplines of ethics and politics are both concerned with the good for man and aim at showing the way towards the attainment of this good.

Ethics defines the good for the individual man and emphasizes the important point that this can be fully attained only in a state or political community with its constitution and institutions. Politics specifies what is the good for the state as the highest form of political association. It stresses the idea that since the whole is of necessity prior to the part, the state is prior to the family and the individual.¹⁵³ Furthermore, it emphasizes the need for the state to legislate laws and provide for an educational program that would enlighten the citizens on how to attain their end in life.

The end is the same for the individual man and the state. But Aristotle considers that of the state as something greater and more complete. For although it is worthwhile to attain the end merely for one man, it is finer and more godlike to attain it for the nation or the state. Thus, for Aristotle, ethics is subordinate to politics which studies the highest of all political communities and aims at the greatest of all good.¹⁵⁴

CONCLUDING NOTES

In the preceding exposition, I have given the salient marks of Aristotle's speculation concerning the good for man. In this final portion of the paper, I would like to make a few remarks on some important points in Aristotle's thought on the human good.

First of all, it is worthwhile to note that before actually presenting his own views concerning the good for man, Aristotle gives an account of what has been said so far on the topic.¹⁵⁵ In doing this, he places in a proper perspective the ethical theory he proposes and allows us to assess its merits

¹⁵¹NE, X, 9, 1180a19.

¹⁵²NE, I, 2, 1094b5; II, 1, 1103b3.

¹⁵³Aristotle, *Politics*; I, 2, 1253a18.

¹⁵⁴*Politics*, I, 1, 1252a3.

¹⁵⁵Above, 3ff.

vis-a-vis the philosophical and non-philosophical perspectives of those before him.

When we direct our attention to Aristotle's ethical view, what novel or outstanding insight may we find in it? His idea that happiness is the chief good of man and the ultimate end of life is not something new. He himself admits that men before him recognized this, and even the ordinary run of men accept its truth. It is true, however, that there is no consensus as to what constitutes happiness or what can be regarded as the surest way to attain it. Aristotle's position with respect to this matter clearly represents his break away from his predecessors - Socrates and Plato, in particular. For Aristotle asserts that happiness consists in a virtuous activity and the latter involves not only knowledge but also choice and action. This is at variance with the Socratic-Platonic view that "virtue is knowledge." In the latter sense, virtue is a matter of knowledge, and vice of ignorance. This implies that "whatever the better course of action may be, if a man knows what this is, he will necessarily follow it; on the other hand, if a man does something that is bad or foolish, this can only be because he didn't realize what he was doing."¹⁵⁶

I think some are inclined to take the side of Aristotle concerning the relation between virtue and knowledge. Virtue presupposes knowledge, since knowledge of what is good is necessary before one can do that which is good. Thus, one must attain a certain level of knowledge and intellectual maturity to become a morally responsible person and live a morally good life. But the mere knowledge of what is good does not necessarily make one a good man. We know for a fact that there are men who are intelligent but are not leading exemplary moral lives; there are people who know what they ought to do but they do not act on this knowledge. We can say with Aristotle that it is only when one consistently and habitually acts in accordance with his understanding of the good to be done in a given situation that he eventually acquires a virtuous state of character; and this in turn disposes him to virtuous activities in whatever circumstance of life he may find himself. "Virtue is not simply a matter of knowledge, it is far more a matter of abiding by one's knowledge and remaining constant to it, instead of letting it be forever displaced by our passions and whims of the moment."¹⁵⁷

But I also think there is a sense in which we can justify the Socratic ideal of virtue as knowledge, and that is when we identify knowledge with conviction. Anyone who is firmly convinced of something feels strongly disposed to express this conviction in action. Thus, we can say that what is essential for the good life is virtuous activity that proceeds from a certain knowledge or conviction of the good that is to be done in a given situation.

The role of knowledge in the virtuous life cannot be undermined. But what is decisive in living the good life is virtuous activity. In stressing the

¹⁵⁶Veatch, *Rational Man: A Modern Interpretation of Aristotelian Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University, c1962), 142.

¹⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 146.

latter, Aristotle goes beyond the Socratic-Platonic ideal and offers a more integrated view of the good life grounded not merely on knowledge but also on activity.

In explaining that virtuous activity involves a choice lying in the mean,¹⁵⁸ Aristotle raises certain difficulties which, I think he has not resolved to the full satisfaction of his critics. For when he says that virtue lies in the "mean," somehow he introduces a sense of relativism or subjectivism in his ethics.

Aristotle thinks that the mean is not absolute but relative to us; it is not the same for all but dependent on the dispositions of the person and the condition of his situation. This means, for example, that while we all need food or exercise, the mean with respect to this is not the same for all. The right amount of food or exercise, or the proper time to indulge in it, is dependent on certain considerations to be made by every person.

Aware of the difficulties inherent in "subjectivism," Aristotle struggles hard to set some kind of an objective and universal norm or criterion in defining the mean.¹⁵⁹

Aristotle says that the mean is chosen in accordance with right reason or a rational principle to be determined by the man of practical wisdom. He tries to explain what "right reason" is. But I think some would agree with one of the critics of Aristotle who says that if we follow Aristotle's explanation, "it is difficult to avoid getting the impression that Aristotle himself is a little uncertain, and perhaps lacks full conviction. . ."¹⁶⁰

As pointed out already, the mean is to be determined by practical wisdom. The latter formulates general rules of action applying to one's particular situation in life. In doing so, he relates his situation to a vision of the good and noble life. Aristotle seems to suggest, in certain passages, that the man of practical wisdom is able to recognize the virtuous life in the exemplary lives of some good or noble men in a community. If these noble men were trained and habituated towards the virtuous life by others who are themselves models in conduct, the question we would have to deal with would be - "Are those men regarded as models inherently good or did they attain a vision of the good and noble life through the reflective activity of 'right reason'?"

Aristotle thinks that there is a natural virtue in every man.¹⁶¹ He is referring to an innate inclination to do the good and live a virtuous life. There is some truth to this. It suggests that there are people who are simply good-natured. But along with Aristotle we would say that one will not necessarily

¹⁵⁸Above, 27ff.

¹⁵⁹Oates, *op. cit.*, 321.

¹⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 282.

¹⁶¹Above, 32.

become a virtuous person by just following the instinctive impulse of a natural virtue. For the latter can be misdirected; it can be lured by pleasure; it needs the guidance of practical wisdom in order to settle into a habit and develop into virtue in the strict sense.

The role of practical wisdom, then, cannot be overlooked. But as already pointed out, the mean of practical wisdom makes practical decisions according to the dictates of wisdom of right reason or a rational principle. But how do we know that reason is right? What norm or criterion do we use in determining whether the judgments of reason are right or not?

Aristotle suggests, in certain passages, that reason must take human nature as a guide. Reason needs to reflect on the specifically human functions in order to recognize the ends to which they naturally tend. It must turn "to nature to find out what the good life is or the natural life for us is."¹⁶² In the last analysis, it is the reflective activity of reason that enables us to attain a vision of the good or noble life for man.

However, what human nature is and what ends or purposes are inherent in it are questions which I think are not very clearly treated by Aristotle in his ethics. Be that as it may, in directing our attention to human nature as a guide for the practical judgments of right reason, I think Aristotle laid the foundation of the traditional ethical theory which is also referred to as the ethics of natural law.¹⁶³ It remained for later exponents of this ethical theory to give a clearer perspective on human nature taken as a norm or standard of right reason in formulating judgments on practical matters. Later developments of the ethics of natural law deepened our knowledge of the moral foundation by directing us to the insight that God, as the author of human nature, is the ultimate basis of goodness as well as the ultimate source of perfect happiness for man. And it is reason that discloses this knowledge to us.

I share the view of one author who considers the Aristotelian ethics as the "ethics of the rational man."¹⁶⁴ Aristotle has a high respect for human reason and its capacity to lead man to a vision of reality in its broadest and deepest sense. He thinks that it is the most noble aspect of human nature and it makes him closely resemble God. There are some who think that man should preoccupy himself merely with the practical concerns of the day-to-day life, but others would say with Aristotle that the life given over to contemplation or directed to the pursuit of philosophical knowledge is the best and happiest life for man. The contemplative activity is the most exalted of all human endeavors and it ought to be preferred to the pursuit of pleasure, wealth or honor. In a sense, Aristotle's ethics is an exhortation to live the

¹⁶²Veatch, *op. cit.*, 216.

¹⁶³For a survey of the development of the concept of natural law see Milton A. Gonsalves' *Fagothey's Right and Reason: Ethics in Theory and Practice* (Columbus, Ohio: A. Bell and Howell, c1986), 134ff.

¹⁶⁴Cf. Veatch, *op. cit.*

contemplative or philosophic life. Despite his metaphysical break with Plato, Aristotle actually remained very much under the influence of his master's thought.¹⁶⁵ And this is most manifest when Aristotle argues in favor of the life devoted to philosophy as the noblest life for man.¹⁶⁶

I think the title "ethics of the rational man" appropriately describes the Aristotelian ethics because of the exceptional emphasis "that a human being can actually come to know what the good life is and what is incumbent upon him as a human being to do."¹⁶⁷ And such knowledge is disclosed to him by right reason. But right reason would not suffice if one is to live a morally good life. Confirming what has been earlier pointed out, a modern interpreter of Aristotle says that the "Aristotelian goal for man is not so much to have knowledge as to choose in accordance with such knowledge - not intelligence but intelligent action. The moral virtues involved in choice are at least as important as the intellectual virtues; if not more so. The ethics of the rational man is an ethics of the man who chooses freely, though he has the responsibility of choosing intelligently."¹⁶⁸ Thus, even as we emphasize rationality in action, we must not overlook the element of choice. For in Aristotle, "human worth and merit arise, not from knowing what we need to do but from choosing to do it . . ."¹⁶⁹ This emphasizes that goodness is not given to man's nature as a gift from the gods; it is not a result of chance; it is essentially a matter of choice. Thus, it is within man's power to be virtuous or vicious, to live a noble or a vulgar life, to be a decent or a worthless person, to devote his life to contemplation or to the pursuit of pleasure, wealth or honor. What counts in Aristotelian ethics, then, is not just rational intelligence and knowledge but responsibility and freedom as well. In recognizing the latter, the Aristotelian ethics of the rational man shares something in common with the existentialist ethics of the irrational man.¹⁷⁰ But the two ethical views differ in the attention they give to the irrational or emotional aspects of man's actions. Existentialists give undue emphasis on the irrational influences while Aristotle gives more stress on the rational basis of man's virtuous activities.

It must be noted that in the opening chapters of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that ethics is subordinate to politics, which he considers

¹⁶⁵Oates, *op. cit.*, 371.

¹⁶⁶Cadamer likewise affirms the influence of Plato on Aristotle in the latter's emphasis on the ideal of theoretical life. But Cadamer also stresses the relation between the purely theoretical and practical ideals of life in Aristotle. He thinks that the priority of the theoretical over the practical should not be absolutized. For the knowledge of what is to be done in practice, i.e., practical knowledge or practical reasonableness is the pre-requisite for practical reason's "engaging in theory and in developing theoretical reasonableness." Both dispositions of knowing and reason are supreme in man's life. In Cadamer's reading of Aristotle, then, both the theoretical and practical ideals of life are part of the human enterprise of *philosophia* which is distinct from divine *sophia*. See Cadamer, *op. cit.*, 174ff.

¹⁶⁷Veatch, *op. cit.*, 205.

¹⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁶⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰*Ibid.*

as the "master art."¹⁷¹ I think this is true in a certain sense. Ethics defines what is good for man and it recognizes that the attainment of this good is possible only in a state or in a community of persons. In so far as the science of politics ensures that certain conditions must be realized by the leaders or legislators in a state in order to make possible the attainment of the good for its citizens, it may be regarded as superior to ethics. From a different perspective, however, politics is subordinate to ethics. We may take ethics as a study that defines what is good for man and establishes certain moral principles that are supposed to guide man's conduct as an individual and as a member of a society. Politics, on its part, deals with what is good for the state or a political association. However, when politics specifies what the leaders or legislators of a state must do in order to attain the good of the state and its citizens, it must be guided by ethical or moral principles. Viewed in this light, politics is subordinate to ethics.

Another remark needs to be said with respect to ethics and politics in Aristotle's thought. This concerns the status of the two disciplines as "sciences." Aristotle says that it would be a mistake to expect from ethics and politics the kind of precision that we demand from mathematics and the exact sciences. His reason is that ethics and politics deal with "the fine and just action" which is subject to the "fluctuation of opinion" and admits of much variety that it is often thought to exist only by conviction.¹⁷²

To a certain extent, we may agree with Aristotle. Judgments concerning the good to be done in a given situation do not have the universality and necessity that characterize mathematical propositions. For example, the moral judgment that "I should pursue this career" or what "I should give this amount to a charitable institution" does not have the universal and necessary character of the proposition "2 and 2 are 4" or "the angles of a triangle are equal to 180°."

However, we may still take the practical disciplines of ethics and politics as "sciences," at least in the analogous sense of the term. Both studies possess a set of principles that may be considered as fundamental principles from which we may draw conclusions that can be applied to our particular situations in life. For example, we could cite the statements that "we must do good and avoid evil," that "happiness is the ultimate end of life," that "virtue lies in the mean," and that "the state must address the needs of its citizens." But we must realize that although these statements may be regarded as fundamental or general moral principles of the practical sciences in question, they are not as incontestable or as universally acceptable as those of mathematics and such sciences as chemistry and physics. Moreover, in the sphere of practical science, the conclusion is not merely a proposition but a decision.¹⁷³ And in making a moral decision or "in moral reasoning I always find myself in a particular situation, and the task is not to subsume this particular case under a universal rule which I could know apart from the

¹⁷¹Above, 43. See also *NE*, I, 2, 1094a28.

¹⁷²Above, 14.

¹⁷³Gadamer, *op. cit.*, 165.

situation I am in, but to define from within my situation what the general rule is of which this situation is an instance."¹⁷⁴

In certain passages of his work on ethics, Aristotle stresses that the test of soundness or validity of a theory is the coherence of its elements and its harmony with facts or realities. We can say that Aristotle's theory on the good for man meets this criterion. The following may make this clear.

The ethical theory which Aristotle proposes in his *Nicomachean Ethics* is not very abstract. Many of its assertions refer to "this-worldly realities" and one can easily give assent to these. That we all aim at happiness, that it is within our power to attain this, that virtue lies in the mean, that pleasure is not totally bad and may accompany virtuous activities, and that it is within man's power to be virtuous or vicious, are statements which are compatible with commonly held opinions and may be easily integrated with the ethical worldview of the ordinary man. According to one author, Aristotle's conclusions concerning ethical matters do not conflict with "accepted views" but confirm and justify them.¹⁷⁵ As a final remark, I would say that the study of Aristotle's ethics would lead us back to an important source of many of the ideas that we may find in texts dealing with traditional or natural law ethics.¹⁷⁶ This study would, then, allow us to gain a more firm hold on the foundations of traditional ethics which, despite the plurality of ethical doctrines in our time may still be regarded as a meaningful guide in living the morally good life.

I personally think that Aristotle's ethics cannot be simply written off as an empty or unrealistic theory. There is a lot of sense and realism in it, and it cannot easily fade away or go out of fashion. One author says that the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle "still appeals to us as refreshing and liberating after our own long struggle to emancipate ourselves from the limitations of our own recent moral tradition."¹⁷⁷ And the significance of Aristotle's classic ethical theory for our ongoing reflections on the meaning of the good life is acknowledged by a prominent contemporary philosopher who says that,

"... philosophical ethics has almost never renounced its right to inject its normative judgments into life as it is actually lived. To this extent Aristotle lives on."¹⁷⁸

It is hoped that the foregoing statements on the value of Aristotle's ethics would invite the reader to go beyond this introductory exploration on Aristotle's ethical thought to a personal reading and appreciation of one of the classic texts on the meaning of the good life - the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

¹⁷⁴P. Christopher Smith in Gadamer, *op. cit.*, translator's introduction, xxvii. For a rather extensive treatment of what is involved in moral reasoning and the difference between the application of a moral theory and that of a scientific theory, see Chapter VI of the work of Gadamer already cited.

¹⁷⁵Randall, *Aristotle* (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1966), 244.

¹⁷⁶See Fagothey, *Right and Reason: Ethics in Theory and Practice*, (St. Louis: The C.J. Mosby Co., 1972) or Milton A. Gonsalves' 1986 revised edition of this work.

¹⁷⁷Randall, *op. cit.*, 124.

¹⁷⁸Gadamer, *op. cit.*, 169-70.

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