The Nicomachean ethics of Aristotle

Aristotle

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By Aristotle

Introduction by J. A. Smith

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INTRODUCTION

The _Ethics_ of Aristotle is one half of a single treatise of which his _Politics_ is the other half. Both deal with one and the same subject. This subject is what Aristotle calls in one place the “philosophy of human affairs;” but more frequently Political or Social Science. In the two works taken together we have their author’s whole theory of

human conduct or practical activity, that is, of all human activity which is not directed merely to knowledge or truth. The two parts of this treatise are mutually complementary, but in a literary sense each is independent and self-contained. The proem to the _Ethics_ is an introduction to the whole subject, not merely to the first part; the last chapter of the _Ethics_ points forward to the _Politics_, and sketches for that part of the treatise the order of enquiry to be pursued (an order which in the actual treatise is not adhered to).

The principle of distribution of the subject-matter between the two works is far from obvious, and has been much debated. Not much can be gathered from their titles, which in any case were not given to them by their author. Nor do these titles suggest any very compact unity in the works to which they are applied: the plural forms, which survive so oddly in English (Ethic_s_, Politic_s_), were intended to indicate the treatment within a single work of a _group_ of connected questions. The unity of the first group arises from their centring round the topic of character, that of the second from their connection with the existence and life of the city or state. We have thus to regard the _Ethics_ as dealing with one group of problems and the _Politics_ with a second, both falling within the wide compass of Political Science. Each of these groups falls into sub-groups which roughly correspond to the several books in each work. The tendency to take up one by one the various problems which had suggested themselves in the wide field obscures both the unity of the subject-matter and its proper articulation. But it is to be remembered that what is offered us is avowedly rather an enquiry than an exposition of hard and fast doctrine.

Nevertheless each work aims at a relative completeness, and it is

important to observe the relation of each to the other. The distinction is not that the one treats of Moral and the other of Political Philosophy, nor again that the one deals with the moral activity of the individual and the other with that of the State, nor once more that the one gives us the theory of human conduct, while the other discusses its application in practice, though not all of these misinterpretations are equally erroneous. The clue to the right interpretation is given by Aristotle himself, where in the last chapter of the _Ethics_ he is paving the way for the _Politics_. In the _Ethics_ he has not confined himself to the abstract or isolated individual, but has always thought of him, or we might say, in his social and political context, with a given nature due to race and heredity and in certain surroundings. So viewing him he has studied the nature and formation of his character—all that he can make himself or be made by others to be. Especially he has investigated the various admirable forms of human character and the mode of their production. But all this, though it brings more clearly before us what goodness or virtue is, and how it is to be reached, remains mere theory or talk. By itself it does not enable us to become, or to help others to become, good. For this it is necessary to bring into play the great force of the Political Community or State, of which the main instrument is Law. Hence arises the demand for the necessary complement to the _Ethics, i.e._, a treatise devoted to the questions which centre round the enquiry; by what organisation of social or political forces, by what laws or institutions can we best secure the greatest amount of good character?

We must, however, remember that the production of good character is not the end of either individual or state action: that is the aim of the one and the other because good character is the indispensable

condition and chief determinant of happiness, itself the goal of all human doing. The end of all action, individual or collective, is the greatest happiness of the greatest number. There is, Aristotle insists, no difference of kind between the good of one and the good of many or all. The sole difference is one of amount or scale. This does not mean simply that the State exists to secure in larger measure the objects of degree which the isolated individual attempts, but is too feeble, to secure without it. On the contrary, it rather insists that whatever goods society alone enables a man to secure have always had to the individual—whether he realised it or not—the value which, when so secured, he recognises them to possess. The best and happiest life for the individual is that which the State renders possible, and this it does mainly by revealing to him the value of new objects of desire and educating him to appreciate them. To Aristotle or to Plato the State is, above all, a large and powerful educative agency which gives the individual increased opportunities of self-development and greater capacities for the enjoyment of life.

Looking forward, then, to the life of the State as that which aids support, and combines the efforts of the individual to obtain happiness, Aristotle draws no hard and fast distinction between the spheres of action of Man as individual and Man as citizen. Nor does the division of his discussion into the _Ethics_ and the _Politics_ rest upon any such distinction. The distinction implied is rather between two stages in the life of the civilised man—the stage of preparation for the full life of the adult citizen, and the stage of the actual exercise or enjoyment of citizenship. Hence the _Ethics_, where his attention is directed upon the formation of character, is largely and centrally a treatise on Moral Education. It discusses especially those admirable

human qualities which fit a man for life in an organised civic community, which makes him “a good citizen,” and considers how they can be fostered or created and their opposites prevented.

This is the kernel of the _Ethics_, and all the rest is subordinate to this main interest and purpose. Yet “the rest” is not irrelevant; the whole situation in which character grows and operates is concretely conceived. There is a basis of what we should call Psychology, sketched in firm outlines, the deeper presuppositions and the wider issues of human character and conduct are not ignored, and there is no little of what we should call Metaphysics. But neither the Psychology nor the Metaphysics is elaborated, and only so much is brought forward as appears necessary to put the main facts in their proper perspective and setting. It is this combination of width of outlook with close observation of the concrete facts of conduct which gives its abiding value to the work, and justifies the view of it as containing Aristotle’s Moral Philosophy. Nor is it important merely as summing up the moral judgments and speculations of an age now long past. It seizes and dwells upon those elements and features in human practice which are most essential and permanent, and it is small wonder that so much in it survives in our own ways of regarding conduct and speaking of it. Thus it still remains one of the classics of Moral Philosophy, nor is its value likely soon to be exhausted.

As was pointed out above, the proem (Book I., cc. i-iii.) is a prelude to the treatment of the whole subject covered by the _Ethics_ and the _Politics_ together. It sets forth the purpose of the enquiry, describes the spirit in which it is to be undertaken and what ought to be the expectation of the reader, and lastly states the necessary conditions of

studying it with profit. The aim of it is the acquisition and propagation of a certain kind of knowledge (science), but this knowledge and the thinking which brings it about are subsidiary to a practical end. The knowledge aimed at is of what is best for man and of the conditions of its realisation. Such knowledge is that which in its consumate form we find in great statesmen, enabling them to organise and administer their states and regulate by law the life of the citizens to their advantage and happiness, but it is the same kind of knowledge which on a smaller scale secures success in the management of the family or of private life.

It is characteristic of such knowledge that it should be deficient in "exactness," in precision of statement, and closeness of logical concatenation. We must not look for a mathematics of conduct. The subject-matter of Human Conduct is not governed by necessary and uniform laws. But this does not mean that it is subject to no laws. There are general principles at work in it, and these can be formulated in "rules," which rules can be systematised or unified. It is all-important to remember that practical or moral rules are only general and always admit of exceptions, and that they arise not from the mere complexity of the facts, but from the liability of the facts to a certain unpredictable variation. At their very best, practical rules state probabilities, not certainties; a relative constancy of connection is all that exists, but it is enough to serve as a guide in life. Aristotle here holds the balance between a misleading hope of reducing the subject-matter of conduct to a few simple rigorous abstract principles, with conclusions necessarily issuing from them, and the view that it is the field of operation of inscrutable forces acting without predictable regularity. He does not pretend to find in it absolute uniformities, or

to deduce the details from his principles. Hence, too, he insists on the necessity of experience as the source or test of all that he has to say. Moral experience—the actual possession and exercise of good character—is necessary truly to understand moral principles and profitably to apply them. The mere intellectual apprehension of them is not possible, or if possible, profitless.

The _Ethics_ is addressed to students who are presumed both to have enough general education to appreciate these points, and also to have a solid foundation of good habits. More than that is not required for the profitable study of it.

If the discussion of the nature and formation of character be regarded as the central topic of the _Ethics_, the contents of Book I., cc. iv.-xii. may be considered as still belonging to the introduction and setting, but these chapters contain matter of profound importance and have exercised an enormous influence upon subsequent thought. They lay down a principle which governs all Greek thought about human life, viz. that it is only intelligible when viewed as directed towards some end or good. This is the Greek way of expressing that all human life involves an ideal element—something which it is not yet and which under certain conditions it is to be. In that sense Greek Moral Philosophy is essentially idealistic. Further it is always assumed that all human practical activity is directed or “oriented” to a _single_ end, and that that end is knowable or definable in advance of its realisation. To know it is not merely a matter of speculative interest, it is of the highest practical moment for only in the light of it can life be duly guided, and particularly only so can the state be properly organised and administered. This explains the stress laid throughout by Greek Moral Philosophy upon the necessity of knowledge as a

condition of the best life. This knowledge is not, though it includes knowledge of the nature of man and his circumstances, it is knowledge of what is best—of man's supreme end or good.

But this end is not conceived as presented to him by a superior power nor even as something which _ought_ to be. The presentation of the Moral Ideal as Duty is almost absent. From the outset it is identified with the object of desire, of what we not merely judge desirable but actually do desire, or that which would, if realised, satisfy human desire. In fact it is what we all, wise and simple, agree in naming "Happiness" (Welfare or Well-being)

In what then does happiness consist? Aristotle summarily sets aside the more or less popular identifications of it with abundance of physical pleasures, with political power and honour, with the mere possession of such superior gifts or attainments as normally entitle men to these, with wealth. None of these can constitute the end or good of man as such. On the other hand, he rejects his master Plato's conception of a good which is the end of the whole universe, or at least dismisses it as irrelevant to his present enquiry. The good towards which all human desires and practical activities are directed must be one conformable to man's special nature and circumstances and attainable by his efforts. There is in Aristotle's theory of human conduct no trace of Plato's "other worldliness", he brings the moral ideal in Bacon's phrase down to "right earth"—and so closer to the facts and problems of actual human living. Turning from criticism of others he states his own positive view of Happiness, and, though he avowedly states it merely in outline his account is pregnant with significance. Human Happiness lies in activity or energising, and that in a way peculiar to man with his given nature and his given

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