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ARISTOTLE
NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

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BOOK I

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1. Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. But a certain difference is found among ends; some are activities, others are products apart from the activities that produce them. Where there are ends apart from the actions, it is the nature of the products to be better than the activities. Now, as there are many actions, arts, and sciences, their ends also are many; the end of the medical art is health, that of shipbuilding a vessel, that of strategy victory, that of economics wealth. But where such arts fall under a single capacity--as bridle-making and the other arts concerned with the equipment of horses fall under the art of riding, and this and every military action under strategy, in the same way other arts fall under yet others--in all of these the ends of the master arts are to be preferred to all the subordinate ends; for it is for the sake of the former that the latter are pursued. It makes no difference whether the activities themselves are the ends of the actions, or something else apart from the activities, as in the case of the sciences just mentioned.

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2. If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what we should? If so, we must try, in outline at least, to determine what it is, and of which of the sciences or capacities it is the object. It would seem to belong to the most authoritative art and that which is most truly the master art. And politics appears to be of this nature; for it is this that ordains which of the sciences should be studied in a state, and which each class of citizens should learn and up to what point they should learn them; and we see even the most highly esteemed of capacities to fall under this, e.g. strategy, economics, rhetoric; now, since politics uses the rest of the sciences, and since, again, it legislates as to what we are to do and what we are to abstain from, the end of this science must include those of the others, so that this end must be the good for man. For even if the end is the same for a single man and for a state, that of the state seems at all events something greater and more complete both to attain and to preserve; for though it is worth while to attain the end merely for one man, it is finer and more godlike to attain it for a nation or for city-states. These, then, are the ends at which our inquiry, being concerned with politics, aims.

1 3. Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits
of; for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products
of the crafts. Now fine and just actions, which political science investigates, exhibit much variety
and fluctuation, so that they may be thought to exist only by convention, and not by nature. And
5 goods also exhibit a similar fluctuation because they bring harm to many people; for before now
men have been undone by reason of their wealth, and others by reason of their courage. We must
be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premises to indicate the truth
roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true and
with premises of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better. In the same spirit,
10 therefore, should each of our statements be received; for it is the mark of an educated man to
look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits: it is
evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand
from a rhetorician demonstrative proofs.

15 Now each man judges well the things he knows, and of these he is a good judge. And so
the man who has been educated in a subject is a good judge of that subject, and the man who has
received an all-round education is a good judge in general. Hence a young man is not a proper
hearer of lectures on political science; for he is inexperienced in the actions that occur in life, but
its discussions start from these and are about these; and, further, since he tends to follow his
passions, his study will be vain and unprofitable, because the end aimed at is not knowledge but
20 action. And it makes no difference whether he is young in years or youthful in character; the
defect does not depend on time, but on his living and pursuing each successive object as passion
directs. For to such persons, as to the incontinent, knowledge brings no profit; but to those who
desire and act in accordance with a rational principle knowledge about such matters will be of
great benefit.

25 These remarks about the student, the way in which our statements should be received,
and the purpose of the inquiry, may be taken as our preface.

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

1 that have been held would no doubt be somewhat fruitless: it is enough to examine those that are most prevalent or that seem to have some reason in their favour.

5 Let us not fail to notice, however, that there is a difference between arguments from and those to the first principles. For Plato, too, was right in raising this question and asking, as he used to do, 'are we on the way from or to the first principles?' There is a difference, as there is in a race-course between the course from the judges to the turning-point and the way back. For, while we must begin with what is familiar, things are so in two ways--some to us, some without qualification. Presumably, then, we must begin with things familiar to us. Hence any one who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is noble and just and, generally, about the subjects of
10 political science must have been brought up in good habits. For the facts are the starting-point, and if they are sufficiently plain to him, he will not need the reason as well; and the man who has been well brought up has or can easily get starting-points. And as for him who neither has nor can get them, let him hear the words of Hesiod:

15 Far best is he who knows all things himself;
Good, he that hearkens when men counsel right;
But he who neither knows, nor lays to heart
Another's wisdom, is a useless wight.

5. Let us, however, resume our discussion from the point at which we digressed. To judge from the lives that men lead, most men, and men of the most vulgar type, seem (not without
20 some reason) to identify the good, or happiness, with pleasure; which is the reason why they love the life of enjoyment. For there are, we may say, three prominent types of life--that just mentioned, the political, and thirdly the contemplative life. Now the mass of mankind are evidently quite slavish in their tastes, preferring a life suitable to beasts, but they get some reason for their view from the fact that many of those in high places share the tastes of Sardanapallus. But people of superior refinement and of active disposition identify happiness with honour; for
25 this is, roughly speaking, the end of the political life. But it seems too superficial to be what we are looking for, since it is thought to depend on those who bestow honour rather than on him who receives it, but the good we divine to be something of one's own and not easily taken from one. Further, men seem to pursue honour in order that they may be assured of their merit; at least it is by men of practical wisdom that they seek to be honoured, and among those who know them, and on the ground of their excellence; clearly, then, according to them, at any rate,
30 excellence is better. And perhaps one might even suppose this to be, rather than honour, the end of the political life. But even this appears somewhat incomplete; for possession of excellence seems actually compatible with being asleep, or with lifelong inactivity, and, further, with the greatest sufferings and misfortunes; but a man who was living so no one would call happy, unless he were maintaining a thesis at all costs. But enough of this; for the subject has been
35 sufficiently treated even in ordinary discussions. Third comes the contemplative life, which we shall consider later.

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The life of money-making is one undertaken under compulsion, and wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else. And so one might rather take the aforementioned objects to be ends; for they are loved for themselves. But it is evident that not even these are ends--although many arguments have been thrown away in support of them. Let us then dismiss them.

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7. Let us again return to the good we are seeking, and ask what it can be. It seems different in different actions and arts; it is different in medicine, in strategy, and in the other arts likewise. What then is the good of each? Surely that for whose sake everything else is done. In medicine this is health, in strategy victory, in architecture a house, in any other sphere something else, and in every action and choice the end; for it is for the sake of this that all men do whatever else they do. Therefore, if there is an end for all that we do, this will be the good achievable by action, and if there are more than one, these will be the goods achievable by action.

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

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

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From the point of view of self-sufficiency the same result seems to follow; for the complete good is thought to be self-sufficient. Now by self-sufficient we do not mean that which is sufficient for a man by himself, for one who lives a solitary life, but also for parents, children, wife, and in general for his friends and fellow citizens, since man is sociable by nature. But some

1 limit must be set to this; for if we extend our requirement to ancestors and descendants and
 friends' friends we are in for an infinite series. Let us examine this question, however, on another
 occasion; the self-sufficient we now define as that which when isolated makes life desirable and
 lacking in nothing; and such we think happiness to be; and further we think it most desirable of
 5 all things, without being counted as one good thing among others--if it were so counted it would
 clearly be made more desirable by the addition of even the least of goods; for that which is added
 becomes an excess of goods, and of goods the greater is always more desirable. Happiness, then,
 is something complete and self-sufficient, and is the end of action.

10 Presumably, however, to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a
 clearer account of what it is is still desired. This might perhaps be given, if we could first
 ascertain the function of man. For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or any artist, and, in
 general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside
 in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function. Have the carpenter, then,
 and the tanner certain functions or activities, and has man none? Is he naturally functionless? Or
 15 as eye, hand, foot, and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one lay it down
 that man similarly has a function apart from all these? What then can this be? Life seems to be
 common even to plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore,
 the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but it also seems to be
 common even to the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the
 element that has a rational principle (of this, one part has such a principle in the sense of being
 20 obedient to one, the other in the sense of possessing one and exercising thought); and as this too
 can be taken in two ways, we must state that life in the sense of activity is what we mean; for this
 seems to be the more proper sense of the term. Now if the function of man is an activity of soul
 in accordance with, or not without, rational principle, and if we say a so-and-so and a good so-
 and-so have a function which is the same in kind, e.g. a lyre-player and a good lyre-player, and
 so without qualification in all cases, eminence in respect of excellence being added to the
 25 function (for the function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre, and that of a good lyre-player is to
 do so well): if this is the case, [and we state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and
 this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a
 good man to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed
 when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case,] human
 30 good turns out to be activity of soul in conformity with excellence, and if there are more than one
 excellence, in conformity with the best and most complete.

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

35 Let this serve as an outline of the good; for we must presumably first sketch it roughly,
 and then later fill in the details. But it would seem that any one is capable of carrying on and

1 articulating what has once been well outlined, and that time is a good discoverer or partner in
 such a work; to which facts the advances of the arts are due; for any one can add what is lacking.
 And we must also remember what has been said before, and not look for precision in all things
 alike, but in each class of things such precision as accords with the subject-matter, and so much
 5 as is appropriate to the inquiry. For a carpenter and a geometer look for right angles in different
 ways; the former does so in so far as the right angle is useful for his work, while the latter
 inquires what it is or what sort of thing it is; for he is a spectator of the truth. We must act in the
 same way, then, in all other matters as well, that our main task may not be subordinated to minor
 questions. Nor must we demand the cause in all matters alike; it is enough in some cases that the
 fact be well established, as in the case of the first principles; the fact is a primary thing or first
 10 principle. Now of first principles we see some by induction, some by perception, some by a
 certain habituation, and others too in other ways. But each set of principles we must try to
 investigate in the natural way, and we must take pains to determine them correctly, since they
 have a great influence on what follows. For the beginning is thought to be more than half of the
 whole, and many of the questions we ask are cleared up by it.

15 8. We must consider it, however, in the light not only of our conclusion and our premises,
 but also of what is commonly said about it; for with a true view all the facts harmonize, but with
 a false one they soon clash. Now goods have been divided into three classes, and some are
 described as external, others as relating to soul or to body; and we call those that relate to soul
 most properly and truly goods. But we are positing actions and activities relating to soul.
 20 Therefore our account must be sound, at least according to this view, which is an old one and
 agreed on by philosophers. It is correct also in that we identify the end with certain actions and
 activities; for thus it falls among goods of the soul and not among external goods. Another belief
 which harmonizes with our account is that the happy man lives well and fares well; for we have
 practically defined happiness as a sort of living and faring well. The characteristics that are
 looked for in happiness seem also, all of excellence, some with practical wisdom, others with a
 25 kind of philosophic wisdom, others with these, or one of these, accompanied by pleasure or not
 without pleasure; while others include also external prosperity. Now some of these views have
 been held by many men and men of old, others by a few persons; and it is not probable that
 either of these should be entirely mistaken, but rather that they should be right in at least some
 one respect or even in most respects.

30 With those who identify happiness with excellence or some one excellence our account is
 in harmony; for to excellence belongs activity in accordance with excellence. But it makes,
 perhaps, no small difference whether we place the chief good in possession or in use, in state or
 in activity. For the state may exist without producing any good result, as in a man who is asleep
 or in some other way quite inactive, but the activity cannot; for one who has the activity will of
 35 necessity be acting, and acting well. And as in the Olympic Games it is not the most beautiful

1 and the strongest that are crowned but those who compete (for it is some of these that are victorious), so those who act rightly win the noble and good things in life.

5 Their life is also in itself pleasant. For pleasure is a state of soul, and to each man that which he is said to be a lover of is pleasant; e.g. not only is a horse pleasant to the lover of horses, and a spectacle to the lover of sights, but also in the same way just acts are pleasant to the lover of justice and in general excellent acts to the lover of excellence. Now for most men their pleasures are in conflict with one another because these are not by nature pleasant, but the lovers of what is noble find pleasant the things that are by nature pleasant; and excellent actions are such, so that these are pleasant for such men as well as in their own nature. Their life, therefore, 10 has no further need of pleasure as a sort of adventitious charm, but has its pleasure in itself. For, besides what we have said, the man who does not rejoice in noble actions is not even good; since no one would call a man just who did not enjoy acting justly, nor any man liberal who did not enjoy liberal actions; and similarly in all other cases. If this is so, excellent actions must be in themselves pleasant. But they are also good and noble, and have each of these attributes in the highest degree, since the good man judges well about these attributes and he judges in the way 15 we have described. Happiness then is the best, noblest, and most pleasant thing, and these attributes are not severed as in the inscription at Delos--

Most noble is that which is justest, and best is health;
But pleasantest is it to win what we love.

20 For all these properties belong to the best activities; and these, or one--the best--of these, we identify with happiness.

Yet evidently, as we said, it needs the external goods as well; for it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the proper equipment. In many actions we use friends and riches 25 and political power as instruments; and there are some things the lack of which takes the lustre from blessedness, as good birth, satisfactory children, beauty; for the man who is very ugly in appearance or ill-born or solitary and childless is hardly happy, and perhaps a man would be still less so if he had thoroughly bad children or friends or had lost good children or friends by death. As we said, then, happiness seems to need this sort of prosperity in addition; for which reason some identify happiness with good fortune, though others identify it with excellence. 30

9. For this reason also the question is asked, whether happiness is to be acquired by learning or by habituation or some other sort of training, or comes in virtue of some divine providence or again by chance. Now if there is any gift of the gods to men, it is reasonable that happiness should be god-given, and most surely god-given of all human things inasmuch as it is 35 the best. But this question would perhaps be more appropriate to another inquiry; happiness seems, however, even if it is not god-sent but comes as a result of excellence and some process

1 of learning or training, to be among the most godlike things; for that which is the prize and end
of excellence seems to be the best thing and something godlike and blessed.

5 It will also on this view be very generally shared; for all who are not maimed as regards
excellence may win it by a certain kind of study and care. But if it is better to be happy thus than
by chance, it is reasonable that the facts should be so, since everything that depends on the action
of nature is by nature as good as it can be, and similarly everything that depends on art or any
cause, and especially if it depends on the best of all causes. To entrust to chance what is greatest
and most noble would be a very defective arrangement.

10 The answer to the question we are asking is plain also from the definition; for it has been
said to be a certain kind of activity of soul. Of the remaining goods, some are necessary and
others are naturally co-operative and useful as instruments. And this will be found to agree with
what we said at the outset; for we stated the end of political science to be the best end, and
political science spends most of its pains on making the citizens to be of a certain character, viz.
good and capable of noble acts.

15 It is natural, then, that we call neither ox nor horse nor any other of the animals happy;
for none of them is capable of sharing in such activity. For this reason also a boy is not happy;
for he is not yet capable of such acts, owing to his age; and boys who are called happy are being
congratulated by reason of the hopes we have for them. For there is required, as we said, not only
complete excellence but also a complete life, since many changes occur in life, and all manner of
20 chances, and the most prosperous may fall into great misfortunes in old age, as is told of Priam in
the Trojan Cycle; and one who has experienced such chances and has ended wretchedly no one
calls happy.

25 10. Must no one at all, then, be called happy while he lives; must we, as Solon says, see
the end? Even if we are to lay down this doctrine, is it also the case that a man is happy when he
is dead? Or is not this quite absurd, especially for us who say that happiness is an activity? But if
we do not call the dead man happy, and if Solon does not mean this, but that one can then safely
call a man blessed as being at last beyond evils and misfortunes, this also affords matter for
discussion; for both evil and good are thought to exist for a dead man, as much as for one who is
alive but not aware of them; e.g. honours and dishonours and the good or bad fortunes of
30 children and in general of descendants. And this also presents a problem; for though a man has
lived blessedly up to old age and has had a death worthy of his life, many reverses may befall his
descendants--some of them may be good and attain the life they deserve, while with others the
opposite may be the case; and clearly too the degrees of relationship between them and their
ancestors may vary indefinitely. It would be odd, then, if the dead man were to share in these
35 changes and become at one time happy, at another wretched; while it would also be odd if the

1 fortunes of the descendants did not for some time have some effect on the happiness of their
ancestors.

5 But we must return to our first difficulty; for perhaps by a consideration of it our present
problem might be solved. Now if we must see the end and only then call a man blessed, not as
being blessed but as having been so before, surely it is odd that when he is happy the attribute
that belongs to him is not to be truly predicated of him because we do not wish to call living men
happy, on account of the changes that may befall them, and because we have assumed happiness
10 to be something permanent and by no means easily changed, while a single man may suffer
many turns of fortune's wheel. For clearly if we were to follow his fortunes, we should often call
the same man happy and again wretched, making the happy man out to be a 'chameleon and
insecurely based'. Or is this following his fortunes quite wrong? Success or failure in life does
not depend on these, but human life, as we said, needs these as well, while excellent activities or
their opposites are what determine happiness or the reverse.

15 The question we have now discussed confirms our definition. For no function of man has
so much permanence as excellent activities (these are thought to be more durable even than
knowledge), and of these themselves the most valuable are more durable because those who are
blessed spend their life most readily and most continuously in these; for this seems to be the
reason why we do not forget them. The attribute in question, then, will belong to the happy man,
and he will be happy throughout his life; for always, or by preference to everything else, he will
do and contemplate what is excellent, and he will bear the chances of life most nobly and
20 altogether decorously, if he is 'truly good' and 'foursquare beyond reproach'.