Nicomachean Ethics

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ARISTOTLE

Aristotle was the son of a doctor named Nicomachus, who served the Macedonian court. Few details are known of his life before 367 B.C., when he traveled to Athens to study at Plato's Academy, remaining there until Plato's death in 347. After that, Aristotle lived in Asia Minor, where he continued studying philosophy under the patronage of Hermeias, a pro-Macedonian ruler, and whose daughter, Pythias, he married. A few years later, he moved back to Macedon, where, in 343, he began tutoring the young Alexander the Great. In 334, he returned to Athens, where he founded his own philosophical school, the Lyceum. Aristotle's philosophical teaching departed from Plato's in important ways, especially in his rejection of Plato's teaching on the Forms, which Aristotle saw as too abstract to be generally useful. Sometimes referred to simply as "The Philosopher," Aristotle's ideas have borne tremendous influence on subsequent philosophy up to the present day—not just in ancient Greece or Western Europe, but in the medieval Islamic world as well—and for centuries his thought also influenced approaches to the natural sciences, psychology, politics, and rhetoric. After his wife Pythias's death, Aristotle had a son, Nicomachus, with a woman named Herpyllis. (The *Nicomachean Ethics* is probably named for Aristotle's son and/or his father.) After Alexander the Great's death in 323, anti-Macedonian sentiment broke out anew in Athens, so Alexander relocated once more, to the island of Euboea, where he died the following year.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Aristotle was alive when, under Philip II and later his son Alexander the Great, the kingdom of Macedon conquered Greece and the Persian Empire. Although the Macedonians portrayed themselves as Greeks, Greeks themselves tended to view the Macedonians as foreign invaders, leading to cultural tensions. Aristotle himself wasn't an Athenian citizen, and he had close personal connections with the court of the Macedonian kings, including leadership of the royal academy, where he taught future rulers including Alexander, Ptolemy, and Cassander. *Nicomachean Ethics* is based on Aristotle's lecture notes for the Lyceum, the philosophy school he founded in Athens around 334 B.C. Aristotle lectured, wrote, and compiled a library here. After his death, the school endured for several centuries, drawing students (mainly young Athenian males) from all over the Mediterranean. The school was destroyed during the Roman general Sulla's sack of Athens in 86 B.C., though it briefly revived under the patronage of Marcus Aurelius in the second century A.D.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Because Aristotle was a student of Plato, familiarity with Plato's dialogues—especially those dealing with the Platonic idea of the Forms, including *The Symposium*, *Phaedo*, and the *The Republic*—is useful for understanding what Aristotle is building on and reacting against in his own writings. Within Aristotle's own body of work, *Politics* may have originated as a lecture series following the *Ethics*, so it's a natural point for digging deeper into Aristotle's thought. After the fall of the western Roman Empire in the fifth century A.D., study of Aristotle waned throughout Europe. In the Middle Ages, the extensive Aristotelian commentaries of the Andalusian Muslim philosopher, Averroes (1126-1198), helped revive Western interest in Aristotle as well as arguing for philosophy as an Islamic pursuit. Building on this legacy a century later, the Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) attempted to synthesize Aristotelian philosophy with Christian teachings, as seen especially in his influential *Summa Theologiae*, and even authored a commentary specifically on *Nicomachean Ethics*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Nicomachean Ethics*
- **When Written:** Likely after 335 B.C.
- **Where Written:** Athens, Greece
- **When Published:** Likely after 335 B.C.
- **Literary Period:** Classical Greek
- **Genre:** Philosophical treatise

EXTRA CREDIT

Renaissance Portrayal. In Raphael's famous painting, *The School of Athens*—painted in the early 1500s and now viewable in Vatican City—Aristotle is pictured holding a copy of *Nicomachean Ethics*. He appears next to his teacher, Plato. While Plato points heavenward, Aristotle gestures, palm downward, to his present surroundings—indicating their respective philosophical emphases (Plato's teaching on the eternal Forms and Aristotle's focus on concrete particulars).

Lecture Notes. *Nicomachean Ethics*, likely based on Aristotle's lectures in the Lyceum, may have been compiled in its current form by later editors. When studying the *Ethics*, it's worth keeping in mind its probable character as a general teaching outline; it's not meant to be a comprehensive work.

©2020 LitCharts LLC v.007

PLOT SUMMARY

Aristotle begins by seeking to identify the best way of life. To do this, it's necessary to identify the best good, or end—the thing people pursue for its own sake, not for the sake of anything else. He digresses to explain that *Nicomachean Ethics* will be a work of political science, the science which seeks the good of the **city**. He also points out that this work will "indicate the truth roughly and in outline," not comprehensively.

Most people agree that happiness is the highest good, but they disagree about what it consists of. To understand the highest good, then, it's necessary to understand the function of a human being. Aristotle describes this human function as "activity of the soul in accord with reason," or, more particularly, with virtue.

There are virtues of thought and virtues of character. Virtues of character aren't natural to us; they are achieved by means of habit. Because it's the case that activities produce character, it's important to figure out the right ways of acting which result in states of character—that is, actions which accord with reason. States tend to be ruined by excess or deficiency, just as too much or too little exercise can be harmful to bodily strength; the goal is to aim for the mean. This mean, or intermediate state, involves "having […] feelings at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way." In other words, being virtuous involves more than simply doing the right thing, but doing the right thing while in the appropriate, intermediate, state. Virtue has various preconditions; for example, one must deliberate and then decide on the virtuous end toward which one is aiming.

Aristotle discusses various specific virtues of character, and the extremes between which each is the mean, in detail. Bravery, for instance, is the state between rashness and cowardice. Temperance is a moderate appetite for fine things. A generous person avoids both wastefulness and ungenerosity. Magnificence involves spending worthy amounts on large purposes (such as temples for the gods), and magnanimity involves both being worthy of great honors and knowing one is worthy of such. A mild person is only angry at the appropriate times and to an appropriate extent. A friendly person is neither "ingratiating" nor cantankerous. Aristotle also discusses justice, which secures and maintains happiness for the political community. Because justice is concerned not only with the benefit of the individual, but with the benefit of society, it can be considered a kind of summary of the virtues.

Aristotle also discusses virtues of thought, which are those states that direct the soul toward truth. One of the most important is prudence, which is the ability to deliberate about what promotes good living—thus it's the ability to reason correctly about virtue, not just in general, but with regard to particular situations.

One of the chief impediments to virtue is incontinence, or lack of self-restraint, which Aristotle addresses at length. People who lack self-restraint understand that it's wrong to pursue a given pleasure, and they even deliberate and decide accordingly, but still act against their decision. The incontinent person can be trained through habituation to act according to virtue, whereas, say, the intemperate person is harder to correct because he believes it's right to pursue his vice.

Aristotle discusses friendship at length because it involves virtue to a large degree. Friendship is also important to political science because it holds cities together. The most complete friendship occurs between people who are similar in virtue. Such friends desire good things for each other for their friend's sake, not for any benefit or pleasure they might derive from one another. True friendship enables the cultivation of virtue. This happens especially when friends "live together," sharing pleasures and pains in common.

Aristotle ultimately argues that because the supreme human virtue is understanding, the greatest happiness is achieved through study, or philosophical contemplation. But even though the contemplative life is the most desirable, the political life must be pursued for the sake of society's good. He explains that most people don't have a taste for virtue and that argument alone won't reform their habits. This is why laws are needed—to introduce people to virtue in their youth and habituate them throughout their lives. Therefore, anyone who is concerned for the good of others and for society as a whole must study law and political systems, which Aristotle will address elsewhere.

CHARACTERS

Aristotle The likely speaker throughout the work, since *Nicomachean Ethics* is believed to have been derived from Aristotle's lecture notes. Aristotle was a Macedonian who lived between 384 B.C.E and 322 B.C.E. He studied under Plato in his youth, then built a career as a philosophical teacher himself, culminating in the founding of Athens' Lyceum, where the material in *Nichomachean Ethics* would have first been taught. Much of *Nicomachean Ethics* is Aristotle indirectly dialoguing with Plato, especially in Book 1, Chapter 7, where he mentions "our friends" (implicitly Plato and his followers) putting forth the idea of the Universal Good, which Aristotle himself rejects. Aristotle favors particulars rather than abstractions like the Universal Good, because particulars are what people deal with in their daily lives as they seek to practice virtues—for instance, while some may be more interested in the abstract, broad idea of "Health," Aristotle is interested in human health, and specifically the health of a single individual. Throughout *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle charts the way that virtue—of which there is both intellectual and moral—affects behavior, decision-making, friendship (which comes in many forms),

pleasure, and happiness for both an individual and a wider community.

TERMS

End – The end of something is the ultimate result or benefit toward which a process is tending. For example, health is the end of medicine, and a boat is the end of boatbuilding.

Good – The good of something is similar to its end; it is the result that something rationally aims for. Aristotle says that the best good is the end that we desire for its own sake, the ultimate end toward which all lesser goods are aiming. Knowledge of this "best good" is key to determining how best to live our lives.

Political Science – Aristotle describes political science as the highest of the sciences, to which all other fields of study are subordinate. Its goal is securing and maintaining the happiness of society through laws and systems of governance. Since *Nicomachean Ethics* is an inquiry into what produces human happiness, it can be considered a work of political science by Aristotle's definition.

Happiness – According to Aristotle, happiness (*eudaimonia* in Greek) is the highest good of human beings, the end toward which all lesser ends are aiming, and something which doesn't promote any good higher than itself. Happiness shouldn't be equated with an emotion or simply with pleasure; rather, it's living well. Happiness is achieved by practicing the virtues.

Virtue – Aristotle sees the intended function of a human being as the activity of the soul in accord with reason, and virtue is a state whereby a person performs that intended function well. A state is a disposition to do a certain thing "at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right ways." So someone who practices the virtue of bravery, for instance, does not just behave courageously, but exercises the appropriate amount of courage under a specific set of circumstances, while avoiding the extremes of rashness and cowardice. Determining this virtuous mean and acclimating oneself to various virtues through habituation is, for Aristotle, the key to happiness.

Habituation – Habituation is the "repetition of similar activities" which, when practiced consistently throughout one's life, results in a state of character, or virtue. For example, just as someone becomes a harpist by practicing the harp, a person becomes temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions, and so on.

State – A state is a disposition, formed through habituation, to act in a certain way. It is more than just a feeling or habit, though; it also involves desires and decision. All these factors, when rightly directed, produce virtues.

Mean – The mean is an intermediate state between an excess and a deficiency. For example, bravery is the mean between rashness and cowardice. Determining the mean is key to the practice of virtue. The mean is not the same thing as simply being moderate. For instance, under a given set of circumstances, it might be appropriate for someone to be very angry; but if their anger is directed at the right person(s) and does not become a drawn-out grudge, then their anger is not inconsistent with the virtuous mean of mildness. Clearly, then, determining the mean depends upon particular circumstances, requires deliberation, and cannot be reduced to a mechanical calculation.

Fine – Aristotle often uses the term "fine" to describe something that is done rightly and correctly; the term even has connotations of beauty and admirability. Fineness is associated with the virtues; a virtuous person decides on a particular action because it is fine. It's often contrasted with what is merely expedient or pleasurable.

Prudence – Prudence is a prerequisite to virtue. Aristotle defines prudence as the ability to "deliberate finely […] about what sorts of things promote living well in general." In other words, discerning the mean in a given circumstance requires prudence.

Continence / Incontinence – Continence is a prerequisite to virtue, and incontinence is an impediment to it. The person who is "incontinent" lacks self-restraint or mastery over one's nonrational desires. Such a person might have the ability to deliberate and reach a prudent decision, but still acts according to one's nonrational appetites.

Friendship – Aristotle defines friendship as "reciprocated goodwill." While it involves affection for another person, the best kind of friendship is especially characterized by the desire for the other person's good, for that person's own sake, and not for any benefit or pleasure one might derive from their friendship. Such friendship occurs between those who are of similar virtue. Aristotle discusses friendship at length in *Nicomachean Ethics* because he sees it as critical for the cultivation of virtue and thus important for happiness and the wellbeing of society.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE NATURE AND PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Aristotle, who lived in the fourth century B.C., was the first philosopher to study ethics as a distinct

field. For Aristotle, ethics is about discovering the highest good for an individual and a community, and that requires, first, an understanding of the end toward which all human beings ultimately strive. In the driving argument for the whole of his ethical treatise, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that the highest good is happiness, and that happiness is achieved when people fulfill their rational soul's function of living virtuously.

Aristotle argues that the best and highest good is happiness. He starts by arguing that every action "seems to seek some good," and that the best good is the one sought for its own sake, not for the sake of something else. If we know what this highest good is, then we're able to determine the best way of life; armed with this knowledge, we're more likely, "like archers who have a target to aim at, to hit the right mark." More than anything else, "happiness […] seems complete without qualification. For we always choose it because of itself, never because of something else." For example, we appear to choose things like honor, pleasure, and understanding for themselves, but ultimately we choose them because we believe they will make us happy.

In order to better understand why happiness is the best and highest good, Aristotle says, we need to understand what the function of a human being is. Aristotle argues that "the human function is activity of the soul in accord with reason." He first argues that human function has to be something more than what's found in plants (with whom we share the function of growth) or animals (with whom we share sense perception); what differentiates us from these life forms is the part of our soul that has reason, and not merely the capacity for reason, but the *activity* of reason. Therefore, the human function is the "activity and actions of the soul that involve reason," and the function of the excellent person is to live that life of reason "well and finely." Fulfilling that function well means that it's "completed in accord with [its] virtue." So the highest human good—the fulfillment of human function—is "activity of the soul in accord with virtue, and indeed with the best and most complete virtue." Happiness is found by living virtuously.

So how is the fulfillment of human function—the achievement of happiness—possible? It is necessary to study virtue, Aristotle claims—what it is and how to attain it. Aristotle identifies two types of virtue—virtues of thought, which are associated with the rational part of the soul, and virtues of character, which are associated with the cooperation of the nonrational parts of the soul with reason.

Virtues of thought "[arise] […] mostly from teaching," and virtues of character from habit. Neither type of virtue arises naturally, but we have the natural capacity to acquire them and complete them through habit. "For we learn a craft by producing the same product that we must produce when we have learned it; we become builders, for instance, by building, and we become harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions." So "a state [of character] results from [the repetition of] similar activities." Aristotle calls this "repetition of similar activities" habituation. Just as someone becomes strong through nutrition and training, and "it is the strong person who is most capable of these very actions," so also abstinence from pleasures makes one temperate, and the temperate person is, in turn, capable of abstaining. For another example, with regard to bravery, "habituation in disdain for frightening situations and in standing firm against them makes us become brave, and once we have become brave we shall be most capable of standing firm." So for Aristotle, human happiness is achieved when humans fulfill their function of the virtuous activity of the soul, which is achieved to some extent through study, but especially through a concerted effort to form virtuous habits.

The remainder of *Nicomachean Ethics* is concerned with filling out Aristotle's account of the virtues—what they are, how they are practiced, and how they enable individuals and communities to live well. But Aristotle repeatedly comes back to the foundational question of happiness and understanding happiness in terms of how human beings are supposed to function. According to his account, ethics is a profoundly practical discipline, not meant to theorize about abstract happiness, but to equip people to achieve happiness here and now.

VIRTUES AND THE MEAN

To live a happy life, Aristotle claims, it's necessary to know which virtues one must put into practice in order to attain happiness. Aristotle identifies two types of virtue—virtues of thought, which are associated with the rational part of the soul (these include prudence, understanding, and deliberation), and virtues of character, which are associated with the cooperation of the nonrational parts of the soul with reason (these include bravery, temperance, generosity, and truthfulness, among a number of others). But becoming virtuous is much more than simply knowing what the virtues are. Aristotle's larger argument in *Nicomachean Ethics* is that practicing virtues involves determining the "mean" (the intermediate) between an excess and a deficiency, and that this determination requires wisdom, not a mechanical application of a method.

According to Aristotle, a virtue is a state of something whereby it performs its intended function well. Such a state is achieved when someone determines the "mean" between two extremes. A state is formed by repeated activity—or "habituation"—and consists of a disposition to do a certain thing on the appropriate occasion. Because of this formation through training, a state is something more than a mere feeling or capacity. A person who has habituated herself to bravery, for example, will be inclined to behave bravely when it's appropriate even when she feels fear.

A virtue must also be a "mean" between an excess and a deficiency. Virtues must be exercised "at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right ways." This "intermediate and best condition" "is proper to virtue." Virtues, in other words, should not only be practiced at the appropriate times, but in the appropriate amount—and determining that amount requires wisdom.

The practice of virtue, then, isn't a matter of simply following rules; it requires discernment. The fact that virtue "aims at what is intermediate" doesn't mean one should simply be moderate all the time. For example, in his discussion of anger, Aristotle explains that "the person who is angry at the right things and toward the right people, and also in the right way, at the right time, and for the right length of time, is praised." Virtue likewise doesn't mean simply that our actions should be appropriate to our circumstances. For example, someone who is brave is not fearless; someone who is overconfident about frightening things is considered to be rash, and someone who is excessively fearful is cowardly; the person who exercises the virtue of bravery feels the appropriate level of fear under the circumstances, but stands firm "in the right way, as reason prescribes, for the sake of the fine." Virtue, then, is more like a map than a precise spectrum, and it's not like calculating an arithmetic mean, which never varies. Aristotle's discussion of the virtues is heavily generalized, because much of virtue consists in understanding how the "mean" should be observed under a specific set of circumstances.

A person seeking to develop virtues of character, therefore, must exercise certain intellectual virtues, such as prudence, and the state of continence (self-restraint) is a prerequisite to virtue as well. First, since determining the mean requires the intellectual virtue of prudence, Aristotle links virtue of intellect to virtue of character. A prudent person doesn't make a mechanical application of rules to situations; prudence is a development of one's perception or understanding to meet particular situations. When prudence is developed, a person is equipped to determine what's proportionate in a given circumstance. And there's no straightforward procedure governing this decision-making process; Aristotle's theory offers guidance, not an infallible method.

Continence is also vital in putting virtue into practice. Virtue isn't simply a question of determining the right way to act—an "incontinent" person (one who lacks self-restraint) draws the right conclusions and even makes the right decision about the "mean," but his nonrational desires overpower his rational ones, and he acts against his right decision. Therefore self-restraint must be cultivated alongside one's ability to determine the mean. As Aristotle's discussion of virtue suggests, attaining the mean isn't necessarily a straightforward process—it's difficult, requiring more than just knowledge or practice. This accords with the nature of *Nicomachean Ethics*—the work isn't intended to be a how-to guide, but to sketch an outline of the virtuous life and teach people to ask the right questions as they pursue that life.

VIRTUE AND COMMUNITY LIFE

Aristotle sees human beings as fundamentally political; human capacities are most completely fulfilled in community, so the individual's happiness must involve the happiness of others and ultimately of the community as a whole, not only one's own happiness. While Aristotle's discussion of the virtues seems focused on individual happiness at first glance, the welfare of others is more prominent in his account of the virtues than might be readily apparent. The welfare of others is especially prominent in Aristotle's discussion of virtue and of friendship. Aristotle argues that justice, expressed through law, provides external motivations for the virtuous life, while friendship, expressed through a voluntary, shared pursuit of virtue, provides more organic, informal motivations.

First, justice provides a sort of scaffolding for the virtuous life by giving external supports and pressures toward virtuous living. According to Aristotle, justice is the pinnacle of the virtues. Aristotle describes justice as that in which "all virtue is summed up," because he sees justice as the exercise of all the other virtues of character, and the exercise of these virtues in relation to another person or to one's community, not only with respect to oneself. Aristotle further defines justice as "whatever produces and maintains happiness […] for a political community," expressed particularly in a community's laws, which "aim […] at the common benefit of all." Aristotle describes laws as "a means to make us good," on the assumption that most people must be compelled toward virtue. Law also safeguards this broader application of virtue, since "many are able to exercise virtue in their own concerns, but unable in what relates to another."

Friendship, on the other hand, which Aristotle defines as "reciprocated goodwill," is a kind of informal school for virtue, whether through familial relationships or voluntary companionship. Friendship is necessary to human life, and it "would seem to hold **cities** together, and legislators would seem to be [even] more concerned about it than about justice." This is because, in part, people who are friends and therefore in concord with one another "have no need of justice […] but if they are just they need friendship in addition." So, on one level, friendship is important because it lessens the need for external compulsion (justice through law).

But friendship has a higher function as well. While some so-called friendships exist for the sake of mere utility or pleasure, "complete friendship" is that of "good people similar in virtue." In such a friendship, a person is concerned not primarily for their own pleasure or gain, but for the other person's good, for his or her own sake, and for that person's own character. Friendship, then, is necessary because it promotes virtue.

Friends "live together," by which Aristotle means sharing one another's pleasures and sorrows, which allows for "the cultivation of virtue." "[F]riendship is community," and friends "share the actions in which they find their common life." Such common life is one of the primary ways that people have the opportunity to practice the virtues theoretically discussed throughout *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Both justice, as expressed through legislation, and "complete" friendship, then, are things which cultivate virtue. Aristotle's concern for both justice and friendship also shows that virtue definitely wasn't something to be practiced in isolation. The virtues must always be practiced with the welfare of whole communities in mind, and it's largely in community that people test their virtues and find motivation, through one means or another, to persevere in practicing them.

THE POLITICAL LIFE VS. THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

Because *Nicomachean Ethics* is the earliest systematic treatise on ethics, it's not surprising that it contains extensive discussion of practical virtues and their concrete application in the everyday world (that is, political science). What's more surprising is Aristotle's digression near the end of the work, in which he elevates the life of contemplative study above even political science. He soon concludes, however, that the study of legislation, even if second best, is more urgent than philosophical contemplation. This isn't a contradiction, but an acknowledgement that political life doesn't allow for much contemplation, and that the necessity of working for the good of one's community most often overshadows the contemplative life. By structuring his argument in this way, Aristotle demonstrates that, while philosophy offers complete happiness for those already wise, political life offers the more realistic avenue for the training of the masses in virtue, and thus it's the more vital pursuit.

At the beginning of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle has a discussion about the superiority of political science among all the sciences. Aristotle considers political science to be the "highest ruling science," because it prescribes what should be studied in **cities**; even fields of study like generalship and rhetoric fall under the heading of political science. With its subordinate fields, political science "legislates what must be done and what avoided [...] For while it is satisfactory to acquire and preserve the good even for an individual, it is finer and more divine to acquire and preserve it for a people and for cities." In other words, not only do all lesser sciences answer to political science, but political science governs the pursuit of the good within societies, not just for individuals. Because it's concerned with this question of the good, the whole of *Nicomachean Ethics*—its examination of "fine and just things," and the corresponding pursuit of virtue—is an example of political science. Aristotle's elevation of this science and his methodical consideration and application of it lead one to assume that he sees political life—the practical pursuit of the good in community—as the ideal life.

In Book X, however—near the conclusion of *Nicomachean Ethics*—Aristotle seems to favor the abstract contemplative life above the concrete political life. The philosophical life—that devoted to study (*theoria*, contemplation)—is best. Aristotle says that study or contemplation is the very best activity, so complete happiness is found in study: "If happiness is activity in accord with virtue, it is reasonable for it to accord with the supreme virtue, which will be the virtue of the best thing. The best [thing] is understanding [...] Hence complete happiness will be its activity in accord with its proper virtue; and we have said that this activity is the activity of study." The life of study is also superior because it is in accordance with the life of the gods. "For someone will live [this life] not insofar as he is a human being, but insofar as he has some divine element in him [...] as far as we can, we ought to be pro-immortal, and go to all lengths to live a life in accord with our supreme element [...] The human activity that is most akin to the gods' activity will, more than any other, have the character of happiness." Aristotle makes the point that the gods are not concerned about the practical application of virtue in earthly life, but are free to engage in endless contemplation of the good. As far as they are able, human beings—at least those who've already attained wisdom—should strive for this kind of life, too.

Aristotle then makes another shift and ends his discussion, and the entire work, with an appeal for the importance of moral education and laws. He transitions directly from the discussion of the godlike, contemplative life to the earthly matter of moral instruction and enforcement. He explains that arguments in themselves aren't enough to make most people act virtuously. Moreover, people aren't receptive to ethical argument unless they've been trained since their youth to develop a taste for virtue: "the soul of the student needs to have been prepared by habits for enjoying and hating finely, like ground that is to nourish seed." The character, that is, must be made "suitable for virtue." Such preparation occurs through the laws under which one is brought up from one's youth. Legislators must "urge people toward virtue and exhort them to aim at the fine—on the assumption that anyone whose good habits have prepared him decently will listen to them—but must impose corrective treatments and penalties" on those who don't listen or haven't been adequately prepared. Such coercion is appropriate because law is "reason that proceeds from a sort of prudence and understanding"; in other words, it's a form of virtue in itself.

Therefore, it's necessary that "the community [attend] to upbringing," and to this end, the study of legislative science and political systems is crucial. This study of the "philosophy of human affairs" allows people to grasp "what sort of political system is best; how each [...] should be organized [...] and what habits and laws it should follow." Overall, then, Aristotle frames

the entire treatise with an argument for the importance of the political life—but whereas his opening discussion introduces political science as the highest science, his concluding discussion describes it as a concession to the needs of the majority of society; philosophy is the most complete happiness, but it's attainable only to a few and must be brought "down to earth" through remedial ethical training and legislation.

Aristotle's digression on contemplation underlines his belief that all of the ethics he's just discussed at length are unattainable, unless people live in communities that provide a suitable environment for the attainment of virtue. So even if the very best life isn't political but contemplative, communities need their wisest minds to pursue the political life in order to promote community well-being. It's also worth remembering that this work was intended to be a prologue to Aristotle's more specifically political writings, so to fully understand his views, it needs to be read in conversation with the rest of his work.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE CITY

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, the city takes on several layers of symbolic significance. Because Aristotle is concerned both with the individual's cultivation of virtue and the community's, he sometimes draws comparisons between the human soul and the political life of the city. For example, in his discussion of incontinence, or lack of self-restraint, he says that "The incontinent person is like a city that votes for all the right decrees and has excellent laws, but does not apply them." In this instance, the city represents the individual who struggles to govern themselves effectively—they know *how* to act virtuously, but they don't actually act on that knowledge. Aristotle also draws comparisons between various kinds of human relationships and the political structures found in cities—for example, kingship is like a father's relationship to his children, and a timocracy (rule by property-holders) can be likened to the relationship between brothers. By tying the individual practice of virtues to the overall wellbeing of human society, Aristotle shows how the individual and the community are tightly connected.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Hackett edition of *Nicomachean Ethics* published in 1999.

Book 1 Quotes

❝❝ Suppose, then, that the things achievable by action have some end that we wish for because of itself, and because of which we wish for the other things, and that we do not choose everything because of something else—for if we do, it will go on without limit, so that desire will prove to be empty and futile. Clearly, this end will be the good, that is to say, the best good.

Then does knowledge of this good carry great weight for [our] way of life, and would it make us better able, like archers who have a target to aim at, to hit the right mark? If so, we should try to grasp, in outline at any rate, what the good is, and which is its proper science or capacity.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle discusses the fact that everything we do in life appears to be geared toward some end, and that this ultimate product seems to be more important than the process it takes to get there. There are as many different "ends" as there are activities. In this passage, Aristotle suggests that there is some greater end for the sake of which lesser ends are pursued. If this weren't the case, he explains, then we would just go on indefinitely doing things toward no particular purpose. So there must be a "best good" toward which our activities are working toward, whether we're conscious of this or not. But, more than this, Aristotle suggests that we *should* be aware of our "best good," and not only that, we should aim for it like archers with a very specific target in mind. The rest of the *Ethics* is dedicated to identifying what, in Aristotle's view, our highest good is and how we aim our "arrows" in life accordingly.

❝❝ And so, since this is our subject and these are our premises, we shall be satisfied to indicate the truth roughly and in outline; since our subject and our premises are things that hold good usually, we shall be satisfied to draw conclusions of the same sort. Each of our claims, then, ought to be accepted in the same way. For the educated person seeks exactness in each area to the extent that the nature of the subject allows; for apparently it is just as mistaken to demand demonstrations from a rhetorician as to accept [merely] persuasive arguments from a mathematician. Further, each person judges rightly what he knows, and is a good judge about that; hence the good judge in a given area is the person educated in that area, and the unqualifiedly good judge is the person educated in every area. This is why a youth is not a suitable student of political science; for he lacks experience of the actions in life, which are the subject and premises of our arguments.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is significant because it makes an important contextual point about *Nicomachean Ethics*. This work is not a polished philosophical treatise in the way that, for example, one of Plato's dialogues might be; it is likely derived from Aristotle's lecture notes for his school in Athens, the Lyceum. With that in mind, the *Ethics* should not be read as if it is a comprehensive textbook, with answers that can be neatly applied to any circumstance. Rather, it should be read with the understanding that Aristotle is presenting his ideas to his students "roughly and in outline," expecting them to understand that his claims hold "usually," and trusting his audience to apply them to their lives in the same provisional way. The person able to make such applications will be generally educated, which is why Aristotle doesn't believe that young people are fit students of political science—they simply don't have adequate experience to draw upon in order to make judgments of the kind required. Political science, finally, is the broad study of what makes for happiness in society, not merely "politics" in a modern sense.

❝❝ Presumably, though, we had better examine the universal good, and puzzle out what is meant in speaking of it. This sort of inquiry is, to be sure, unwelcome to us, because those who introduced the Forms were friends of ours; still, it presumably seems better, indeed only right, to destroy even what is close to us if that is the way to preserve truth. We must especially do this as philosophers, for though we love both the truth and our friends, reverence is due to the truth first.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

This quote brings to light a key difference between Aristotle and his teacher, Plato. When he mentions "those who introduced the Forms," he is speaking of Plato and his teaching on the eternal forms, or essences, of goodness, beauty, and other things, of which objects on earth are only imitations. Though Aristotle would have been trained in these ideas, it is generally thought that he rejected them in his own work, as this quote would suggest. Aristotle questions the usefulness of contemplating some universal, abstract "Good" when, in his view, the "good" is simply happiness, and to attain happiness, people must have concrete guidance that applies to their daily lives. By way of comparison, he later goes on to argue that a doctor isn't interested in some universal idea of health, but in *human* health, and more specifically the health of *one* particular human being he seeks to heal at a given time. So, to simplify, where Plato tended to look upward to universals, Aristotle preferred to examine earthly particulars. In terms of this quote, while Aristotle isn't interested in polemical argument, as a philosopher (literally, a lover of truth) he must put truth even above loyalty to friends.

❝ The remaining possibility, then, is some sort of life of action of the [part of the soul] that has reason. One [part] of it has reason as obeying reason; the other has it as itself having reason and thinking. Moreover, life is also spoken of in two ways [as capacity and as activity], and we must take [a human being's special function to be] life as activity, since this seems to be called life more fully. We have found, then, that the human function is activity of the soul in accord with reason or requiring reason. Now we say that the function of a [kind of thing]—of a harpist, for instance—is the same in kind as the function of an excellent individual of the kind—of an excellent harpist for instance. […] Moreover, we take the human function to be a certain kind of life, and take this life to be activity and actions of the soul that involve reason; hence the function of the excellent man is to do this well and finely.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Aristotle considers the function of the human being. He argues that the human soul is made up of two parts: a part that's rational in itself, and a part that must obey reason. At the same time, human life is spoken of in two ways: as having the capacity to do things and as actually doing things. Aristotle asserts that the latter is more properly regarded as "life." So, taking these two things together—the reign of reason in the human soul and the fact that life is properly oriented toward action—he concludes that the function of the human being can be best defined as the life of action of the reasoning part of the soul. Not only that, but this function should be carried out excellently, or "finely"—in the most proper and admirable way—as he often likes to say. Aristotle's argument could be concisely summed up by saying that life is about acting according to reason, to the most excellent degree possible. While this claim sounds fairly straightforward, Aristotle will spend the rest of the Ethics showing that living according to our reason is actually quite hard work, as there are many obstacles to obeying our reason and acting as we should.

Book 2 Quotes

❝ Virtue, then, is of two sorts, virtue of thought and virtue of character. Virtue of thought arises and grows mostly from teaching; that is why it needs experience and time. Virtue of character results from habit; hence its name "ethical," slightly varied from "ethos."

Hence it is also clear that none of the virtues of character arises in us naturally. For if something is by nature in one condition, habituation cannot bring it into another condition. A stone, for instance, by nature moves downwards, and habituation could not make it move upwards, not even if you threw it up ten thousand times […] And so the virtues arise in us neither by nature nor against nature. Rather, we are by nature able to acquire them, and we are completed through habit.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

In Book 1, Aristotle argues that the highest good in a human life is happiness, and that happiness consists in living virtuously. In Book 2, he sets out to explain what virtue is and how it may be obtained. While there are virtues of both thought and character, Aristotle is primarily concerned here with virtues of character. He explains that such virtues—things like courage, generosity, and truthfulness—don't arise naturally in human beings. However, they're not exactly unnatural, either. Rather, we have the natural ability to acquire them, but must practice them through repeated action—habituation—throughout our lives. It's fitting, then, that Aristotle references the Greek word *ethos*, from which both "character" and "habit" derive.

In this passage, Aristotle uses the example of a stone that rolls downhill because of gravity—it's not possible to make it roll uphill, no matter how hard one tries, because that isn't how gravity works. In contrast, a person *can* gradually acquire new virtues through practice. This suggests that Aristotle's view doesn't align neatly with either a "nature" or "nurture" framework; habituation of virtue involves elements of both.

First, then, we should observe that these sorts of states naturally tend to be ruined by excess and deficiency […] The same is true, then, of temperance, bravery, and the other virtues. For if, for instance, someone avoids and is afraid of everything, standing firm against nothing, he becomes cowardly; if he is afraid of nothing at all and goes to face everything, he becomes rash. Similarly, if he gratifies himself with every pleasure and abstains from none, he becomes intemperate; if he avoids them all, as boors do, he becomes some sort of insensible person. Temperance and bravery, then, are ruined by excess and deficiency, but preserved by the mean.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage Aristotle introduces the idea of the mean, which is critical for understanding his teaching on the virtues. First, there's the concept of "states." For Aristotle, a virtue isn't *simply* an act, but an act performed with a particular disposition relative to the feelings involved. A state of virtue is thrown off track if it ever ventures too far in the direction of either an excess (too much) or a deficiency (too little). Bravery is a good example of this—it's expected that even a brave person will feel fear, but the key thing is how one acts relative to that fear. If someone consistently caves in to fear, they become cowardly; if they never feel or heed fear, they become rash. In contrast, a brave person feels an appropriate amount of fear, but stands firm in the face of danger without behaving either cowardly or rashly. This is what Aristotle means by virtues being "preserved by the mean."

That is why it is also hard work to be excellent. For in each case it is hard work to find the intermediate; for instance, not everyone, but only one who knows, finds the midpoint in a circle. So also getting angry, or giving and spending money, is easy and everyone can do it; but doing it to the right person, in the right amount, at the right time, for the right end, and in the right way is no longer easy, nor can everyone do it. Hence doing these things well is rare, praiseworthy, and fine.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

Having explained the concept of the mean, Aristotle makes it clear that determining and adhering to the mean isn't easy. Although Aristotle makes a comparison to finding "the midpoint in a circle," he doesn't mean to imply that finding the mean in virtue is as simple as following a mathematical formula; rather, he's making the point that it requires specialized knowledge and practice. While anyone can get angry or give away money, *how* one does these things is key to doing them virtuously—"in the right amount, at the right time, for the right end, and in the right way" becomes a common refrain throughout *Nichomachean Ethics*. In fact, finding the mean is not only a difficult task, but it varies according to the particular tendencies of each person, as he later explains. Some people are more given to one extreme than the other, so determining the mean requires not only a grasp of virtue itself, but a good deal of self-awareness as well.

Book 3 Quotes

And so, if the same is true for bravery, the brave person will find death and wounds painful, and suffer them unwillingly, but he will endure them because that is fine or because failure is shameful. Indeed, the truer it is that he has every virtue and the happier he is, the more pain he will feel at the prospect of death. For this sort of person, more than anyone, finds it worthwhile to be alive, and knows he is being deprived of the greatest goods, and this is painful. But he is no less brave for all that; presumably, indeed, he is all the braver, because he chooses what is fine in war at the cost of all these goods. It is not true, then, in the case of every virtue that its active exercise is pleasant; it is pleasant only insofar as we attain the end.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, part of Aristotle's discussion of the virtue of bravery, exemplifies both his concept of the "fine" and also the nuance present in his view of the virtues in general. One might imagine that a brave person would walk unflinchingly into death. In a way, this is true, according to Aristotle's conception of bravery; however, he doesn't see the brave person as being devoid of fear, but of being more responsive to the "fine" than they are answerable to their fears. When Aristotle uses the term "fine," he's referring to something

beautiful, praiseworthy, admirable, and correct. The virtuous person desires the fine and orients his or her life toward it. So, in the case of the brave soldier, it isn't that he doesn't fear death, but that his desire to do his duty, perhaps, or to risk his life for his comrades or for a cause (a "fine" thing) is greater than his fears. In fact, because such a virtuous person is sensitively attuned to the fine, he dreads death all the more, but he bravely refuses to shrink from it when called upon to do so.

Book 4 Quotes

Mildness is the mean concerned with anger. [...] The person who is angry at the right things and toward the right people, and also in the right way, at the right time, and for the right length of time, is praised. This, then, will be the mild person, if mildness is praised. For [if mildness is something to be praised,] being a mild person means being undisturbed, not led by feeling, but irritated wherever reason prescribes, and for the length of time it prescribes. And he seems to err more in the direction of deficiency, since the mild person is ready to pardon, not eager to exact a penalty.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

Aristotle's discussion of mildness is another example of the thoughtful balance involved in practicing virtue, and the primacy of reason over feeling in Aristotelian ethics. As in his discussion of the other virtues, mildness has less to do with feelings and more to do with how one corrals one's emotions using reason. For example, Aristotle describes a mild person as being both "undisturbed" and "irritated." Rather than being contradictory, this suggests that while it's appropriate for someone to be irritated under certain circumstances, they are not "led by [their] feeling" to such a degree that it disturbs their equilibrium overall. In other words, the mild person knows when to stop being irritated and is also ready to pardon their offender when appropriate, rather than seeking revenge. In short, there's a right way and a wrong way of being angry (or of handling any other emotion or appetite), and virtue consists in training oneself to do it the right way, until it becomes habitual.

Book 5 Quotes

Now the law instructs us to do the actions of a brave person—for instance, not to leave the battle-line, or to flee, or to throw away our weapons; of a temperate person—not to commit adultery or wanton aggression; of a mild person—not to strike or revile another; and similarly requires actions in accord with the other virtues, and prohibits actions in accord with the vices. The correctly established law does this correctly, and the less carefully framed one does this worse. [...]

Moreover, justice is complete virtue to the highest degree because it is the complete exercise of complete virtue. And it is the complete exercise because the person who has justice is able to exercise virtue in relation to another, not only in what concerns himself; for many are able to exercise virtue in their own concerns, but unable in what relates to another.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Because Aristotle sees *Nicomachean Ethics* as applying to the life of communities as much as to individuals, the subject of the law recurs throughout. He holds that well-established laws will press people toward behaving virtuously with regard to one another and restrain them from acting according to vice. In other words, the law is a teacher and guarantor of justice. For Aristotle, justice is the summation of all the virtues. When a person lives according to virtue, they will inevitably behave justly toward other human beings. But because this is especially difficult—a step above acting virtuously in one's own life—the law is necessary to guide people's relationships with each other along virtuous lines, and to provide redress when people fail to act virtuously. This is another example of Aristotle's ultimate concern with the common good, and it anticipates his more extensive treatment of law later in the book.

That is why the decent is just, and better than a certain way of being just […] And this is the nature of the decent—rectification of law insofar as the universality of law makes it deficient. This is also the reason why not everything is guided by law. For on some matters legislation is impossible, and so a decree is needed. For the standard applied to the indefinite is itself indefinite, as the lead standard is in Lesbian building, where it is not fixed, but adapts itself to the shape of the stone; similarly, a decree is adapted to fit its objects. It is clear from this what is decent, and clear that it is just, and better than a certain way of being just. It is also evident from this who the decent person is; for he is the one who decides on and does such actions, not an exact stickler for justice in the bad way, but taking less than he might even though he has the law on his side. This is the decent person, and his state is decency; it is a sort of justice, and not some state different from it.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

Before concluding his discussion of the just, Aristotle also addresses the concept of the "decent." Even though Aristotle is generally a firm believer in the law, he also acknowledges that, because it's universally applied, the law doesn't necessarily address every particular circumstance successfully. This is where "decency" is called for—to interpret and apply the law in those situations where flexibility is needed. Aristotle's reference to the "lead standard" isn't entirely clear, but scholars guess that he's talking about a flexible lead ruler that could fit the shape of irregular stones when building stone structures. (Aristotle lived on the isle of Lesbos for a while before he began his teaching career, which might account for his familiarity with the architectural oddities there.) Presumably, an inflexible ruler wouldn't serve much of a purpose in this scenario. In the same way, the law can't be inflexibly applied in all cases. This quote also serves as an example of Aristotle's tendency to favor the particular over the universal, even though he clearly sees a role for the latter.

Book 7 Quotes

In fact the incontinent person is like a city that votes for all the right decrees and has excellent laws, but does not apply them, as in Anaxandrides' taunt, 'The city willed it, that cares nothing for laws'. The base person, by contrast, is like a city that applies its laws, but applies bad ones.[…] The [impetuous] type of incontinence found in volatile people is more easily cured than the [weak] type of incontinence found in those who deliberate but do not abide by it. And incontinents through habituation are more easily cured than the natural incontinents; for habit is easier than nature to change.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

Aristotle discusses incontinence, which is the lack of self-restraint. Though incontinence is an impediment to virtue, incontinence is not a vice. The difference is that, unlike someone who is intemperate (a vice) and constantly acts according to his or her base appetites without awareness or remorse, an incontinent person understands that they shouldn't indulge their appetites, but acts against their rational understanding. Anaxandrides, a dramatist from around the same period as Aristotle, offers an illustrative quote: in a case like this, whether speaking of an individual or a city, simply having the will to act rightly isn't enough. Aristotle goes on to say that the more impetuous kind of incontinent people, who don't take the time to reason thoroughly, are easier to reform through habituation than those who weakly fail to abide by reason. This quote shows, again, how many moving parts are at work in Aristotle's understanding of the virtues; feelings, reason, will, and action must be accounted for and trained to relate in harmony.

Book 8 Quotes

Moreover, friendship would seem to hold cities together, and legislators would seem to be more concerned about it than about justice. For concord would seem to be similar to friendship, and they aim at concord among all, while they try above all to expel civil conflict, which is enmity. Further, if people are friends, they have no need of justice, but if they are just they need friendship in addition; and the justice that is most just seems to belong to friendship.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

In the second half of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle devotes a substantial discussion—at least as much space as he devotes to individual virtues—to the subject of friendship. He doesn't regard friendship as simply involving fondness between people, although that is one component. Rather, friendship is expansive, including relationships among fellow citizens within cities as well as everyday bonds of affection. Given Aristotle's concern for larger political dynamics, then, it's not hard to guess why he sees friendship as critical to the thriving of the city. Friends have a kind of natural concord with each other which benefits the city by binding it together and making the external application of justice unnecessary. Hence even lawmakers are concerned to see the thriving of friendship within their cities. This discussion serves as a transition between Aristotle's discussion of living a virtuous life and the role of legislation in securing a good life for communities as a whole.

But complete friendship is the friendship of good people similar in virtue; for they wish goods in the same way to each other insofar as they are good, and they are good in their own right. Now those who wish goods to their friend for the friend's own sake are friends most of all; for they have this attitude because of the friend himself, not coincidentally. Hence these people's friendship lasts as long as they are good; and virtue is enduring.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

Aristotle explains that there are three main types of friendship, and only one of those can be termed "complete." The two "incomplete" forms of friendship are friendship for utility and friendship for pleasure. In friendship for utility, people basically remain friends for as long as they can gain some desired good from one another, but friendship tends to expire once one or both parties have no further use for the bond. Friendship for pleasure is a bit more durable, but again, affection tends to fade as people's desires fluctuate. In contrast to these deficient forms of friendship, "complete" friendship is—as is no surprise by this point in the *Ethics*—founded on virtue. People of similar virtue are drawn to friendship because they admire one another's virtues and desire the best for each other—for their friends' sakes, not for their own. They seek no other personal advantage or fulfillment from the relationship. Because of this, such friendships are inherently more stable—and, Aristotle would likely add, more beneficial in the long run for the flourishing of both friends, as well as for society.

Book 9 Quotes

[...] [I]t is good not to seek as many friends as possible, and good to have no more than enough for living together; indeed it even seems impossible to be an extremely close friend to many people. [...] This would seem to be borne out in what people actually do. For the friendship of companions is not found in groups of many people, and the friendships celebrated in song are always between two people. By contrast, those who have many friends and treat everyone as close them seem to be friends to no one [...] Certainly it is possible to have a fellow citizen's friendship for many people, and still to be a truly decent person, not ingratiating; but it is impossible to be many people's friend for their virtue and for themselves. We have reason to be satisfied if we can find even a few such friends.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

Because Aristotle describes friendship as one of the finest external goods and supports to virtue that a person could desire, it would be natural for someone to assume that they should collect as many friends as possible. However, Aristotle discourages this idea. To him, one of the keys to friendship is life shared in common—friends engaging together in what is most valuable to them—and this kind of depth is likely not attainable with more than a few individuals. In support of this, Aristotle points to the fact that close companions don't usually tend to spend time in large groups, and friendship tends to celebrated culturally as something that occurs between two people. People who try to be friends with everybody are superficial, Aristotle suggests, and wind up with few friends. Moreover, people

generally aren't capable of deeply appreciating the virtue of many people at once.

[…] [W]hat friends find most choiceworthy is living together. For friendship is community, and we are related to our friend as we are related to ourselves. […] Whatever someone [regards as] his being, or the end for which he chooses to be alive, that is the activity he wishes to pursue in his friend's company. Hence some friends drink together, others play dice, while others do gymnastics and go hunting, or do philosophy. They spend their days together on whichever pursuit in life they like most; for since they want to live with their friends, they share the actions in which they find their common life.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

Unsurprisingly, Aristotle's discussion of the importance of friendship builds to the conclusion that friendship is good for society as a whole. This is because friends seek opportunities to pursue in community those things that are most important to them. This could be anything—like games or drinking—but arguably the most "choiceworthy" is the shared discussion of philosophy, which is simply the love of wisdom. So wherever there is "complete" friendship—founded, after all, on the shared pursuit of virtue—presumably that friendship's shared goods will redound to the benefit of the rest of society. Again, this shows the connection between the cultivation of individual virtue and the good of communities. If virtues are best cultivated in the context of friendship, then bonds of friendship should surely be encouraged, because these promote greater harmony and happiness within cities, too.

Book 10 Quotes

Such a life would be superior to the human level. For someone will live it not insofar as he is a human being, but insofar as he has some divine element in him. And the activity of this divine element is as much superior to the activity in accord with the rest of virtue as this element is superior to the compound. Hence if understanding is something divine in comparison with a human being, so also will the life in accord with understanding be divine in comparison with human life. We ought not to follow the makers of proverbs and "Think human, since you are human," or "Think mortal, since you are mortal." Rather, as far as we can, we ought to be pro-immortal, and go to all lengths to live a life in accord with our supreme element; for however much this element may lack in bulk, by much more it surpasses everything in power and value.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

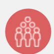
Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

The final book of *Nicomachean Ethics* makes a somewhat unexpected turn, as Aristotle moves from his discussion of friendship to the celebration of the contemplative life devoted to philosophical study. While this would appear to be contradictory to his earlier trajectory of favoring political life, it does not need to be read that way. His point is that human beings' rational capacity for understanding is what brings them closest to the divine life; hence, presuming that the gods are happiest of all beings, humans should engage in contemplation, too, in order to enjoy the greatest approximation of divine happiness which mortals can attain. Aristotle doesn't make many metaphysical claims in the *Ethics*, and he doesn't intend to make a big theological point here; his charge to be "pro-immortal" is mainly a way to support his assertion that study is the highest good. And he doesn't claim that study necessarily has to be pursued in solitude or in isolation from the concerns of the city, so it does not undercut his prevailing concern with political science.

Now some think it is nature that makes people good; some think it is habit; some that it is teaching. The [contribution] of nature clearly is not up to us, but results from some divine cause in those who have it, who are the truly fortunate ones. Arguments and teaching surely do not prevail on everyone, but the soul of the student needs to have been prepared by habits for enjoying and hating finely, like ground that is to nourish seed. For someone who lives in accord with his feelings would not even listen to an argument turning him away, or comprehend it [if he did listen]; and in that state how could he be persuaded to change? And in general feelings seem to yield to force, not to argument.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

After discussing philosophical contemplation as the highest human good, Aristotle backtracks slightly to argue for the importance of law within the human realm. Again, this doesn't have to be read as a contradiction. While Aristotle maintains that study is the most godlike pursuit and the most helpful for an unfettered pursuit of virtue, he is ever attentive to earthly realities—namely the fact that most people don't have a taste for such an exalted lifestyle. Most average people, in fact, aren't even responsive to arguments trying to commend the goodness of virtue. This is unsurprising, since to develop a taste for the fine, the "soil" of people's souls needs to have been carefully tended toward this goal from the time they are young; such preparation rarely occurs in reality. Since most lack that foundation, Aristotle argues that it's to the greater benefit of society as a whole to enact laws that guide people toward virtue and punish vice. So, presumably, those people who are inclined to pure philosophical study can be more useful to society if they commit themselves to creating good laws instead.

Since, then, our predecessors have left the area of legislation uncharted, it is presumably better to examine it ourselves instead, and indeed to examine political systems in general, and so to complete the philosophy of human affairs, as far as we are able. First, then, let us try to review any sound remarks our predecessors have made on particular topics. Then let us study the collected political systems, to see from them what sorts of things preserve and destroy cities, and political systems of different types; and what causes some cities to conduct politics well, and some badly. For when we have studied these questions, we will perhaps grasp better what sort of political system is best; how each political system should be organized so as to be best and what habits and laws it should follow. Let us discuss this, then, starting from the beginning.

Related Characters: Aristotle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is the closing paragraph of *Nicomachean Ethics*. After explaining the necessity of laws to guide people toward virtue and discourage vice, Aristotle explains that there hasn't been an appropriately comprehensive study of law so far—there are bodies of laws and plenty of examples of competing political systems, but there has been no systematic attempt to evaluate these and determine which are most effective and how best to put them into practice. Because cultivation of virtue requires painstaking work, for communities as much as for individuals, it's necessary to determine which laws and structures are the most friendly to the formation of virtue. Aristotle commends this study to those who have listened to his lectures on ethics and encourages them to "start from the beginning" with a similar examination of legislation and political science. (Readers of the *Ethics* can look to his work *Politics* to see the results.) So, although it makes for a rather abrupt ending to the work, it's a fitting conclusion to Aristotle's recurring concern for the happiness of the community.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BOOK 1

Book 1, Chapter 1. According to Aristotle, every craft, line of inquiry, action, and decision seeks some end, or "good," but these goods differ. For example, health is the end of medicine, a boat the end of boatbuilding, and victory the end of generalship.

Aristotle begins with a discussion of four types of goal-directed pursuits. The first two pursuits are aimed at producing something beyond themselves; the latter two are pursued for their own sakes, but Aristotle will go on to argue that even these are ultimately directed toward a higher "good."

Some of these pursuits are "subordinate" to others—for example, bridle-making is subordinate to horsemanship, and various actions in warfare are subordinate to generalship. So, Aristotle claims, the ends of these "ruling sciences" (like horsemanship or generalship) are more "choiceworthy" than their subordinate ends, because the lower ends are pursued for the sake of the higher.

With these examples, Aristotle shows how particular, concrete tasks are pursued for the sake of some higher end, preparing his audience for the idea that there is a highest end toward which all lesser aims strive.

Book 1, Chapter 2. Aristotle notes that "things achievable by action have some end that we wish for because of itself." This end will be the best good. The knowledge of this "best good" is important for determining the best way of life, so all people should try to grasp what that good is and which is its proper science.

In this passage, Aristotle explains the aim of his inquiry in Nicomachean Ethics *as a whole: to figure out the best way of life. While most of our actions are done for the sake of some higher end, there is an ultimate end beyond which we wish nothing more. When we know what this is, we'll be better equipped to pursue the best way of life.*

The "highest ruling science," Aristotle claims, is political science. This science prescribes which sciences should be studied in cities, who should study them, and how much. Even such sciences as generalship, household management, and rhetoric are subordinate to political science.

Aristotle sees political science as the study of how to establish and preserve happiness within societies. This is part of his overall theme that the pursuit of ethics is not just relevant to individuals, but to communities as well.

Because political science uses these other sciences, its end includes the ends of the other sciences, too. This end is the human good, but the good of the **city** is "a greater and more complete good" than the good of an individual. Aristotle notes that even his line of inquiry is a kind of political science because it seeks this "finer and more divine" good.

Because political science is about the human good, any other science one could name ultimately serves political science. Nicomachean Ethics *itself, because it seeks this highest good, can then be classified as a work of political science.*

Book 1, Chapter 3. Aristotle points out that he will be satisfied "to indicate the truth roughly and in outline," and that his claims should be accepted in that same spirit. He also argues that a young person isn't an appropriate student of political science, because a young person is inexperienced and driven by feelings. But for students who "accord with reason in forming their desires […] knowledge of political science will be of great benefit."

Because Nicomachean Ethics *originated in Aristotle's philosophical lectures, it's not intended to be a comprehensive work—a fact that should be kept in mind when evaluating his ideas. Aristotle believes that political science is best studied by those who are experienced in putting reason before feelings, something that, as he will discuss later, is key to the pursuit of virtue overall.*

Book 1, Chapter 4. So what is this highest good that political science seeks? Most people would agree that it is happiness, but they disagree about what happiness consists of. Aristotle says that to determine this, it's necessary to start from what we know—and that is why it's necessary "to have been brought up in fine habits if we are to be adequate students of fine and just things."

Having established that there is a highest good toward which all lesser ends point, Aristotle asks what that good is. He also suggests that if someone hasn't already been brought up in fine (correct, or admirable) ways of thinking, it will be difficult for them to undertake this inquiry well. In other words, to understand what's good, one must be acquainted with the good already.

Book 1, Chapter 5. People generally form their understanding of the good from the type of life they lead, and there are roughly three types of lives: the lives of gratification, of political activity, and of study. Those who lead lives of gratification choose a life that's fit "for grazing animals." In contrast, "Cultivated people," who choose the life of political activity, see the good as honor; but this, too, is inferior to something higher. The third life, that of study, will be discussed in what follows.

From Aristotle's breakdown of the three types of lives, it's not hard to guess that the life of study is the one most oriented toward the good. However, there is an ongoing tension between study and political activity in his thought; while study is best for the individual, political activity is needed in order to preserve the good for society as a whole.

Book 1, Chapter 6. Before proceeding, though, Aristotle points out that it's best to figure out what is meant by the good. Because it is spoken of in so many different ways, we can conclude that there isn't a single, universal good. There are goods that are pursued for the sake of something else, and things that are goods in their own right, and all of these are different. This means that goods can't correspond to some single "Idea."

Though he doesn't directly say so, Aristotle is in dialogue here with Plato's, understanding of universal "Forms," or essences, of which earthly objects are just echoes. Plato, who was Aristotle's mentor, might have said that there is an eternal Form of the Good, but Aristotle sees a variety of goods that don't correspond neatly with a universal idea.

Furthermore, it's unclear how, say, a weaver, a carpenter, or a doctor will benefit from knowing this "Good Itself" or "Idea." A doctor, for instance, isn't interested in some universal idea of health, but in human health, and usually the health of one individual at a time.

Aristotle further rejects Plato's understanding of universals, seeing it as irrelevant to actual practice. Instead, he focuses on particularities, since those are what people most often encounter and deal with in daily life.

©2020 LitCharts LLC

Book 1, Chapter 7. Aristotle explains that since the good appears to be something different in medicine, generalship, and so on, then the highest good must be "that for the sake of which the other things are done," and this good must be "something complete." A complete good is something that is never undertaken for the sake of something else. The thing that seems complete without anything else is happiness, "for we always choose it because of itself, never because of something else." In contrast, things like honor, pleasure, and understanding are always chosen because we believe that *through* them, we'll become happy.

Aristotle searches for the "good" that isn't chosen for the sake of anything higher than itself and concludes that it must be happiness—happiness, he argues, is what human beings strive for above all else. Everything that humans pursue, like pleasure or honor, are just lesser pursuits that are meant to lead to happiness.

In order to better grasp what the best good is, Aristotle says that it's necessary to understand the function of a human being. While we have certain functions in common with plants (the life of nutrition and growth) and animals (sense perception), humanity's unique function is the "life of action of the [part of the soul] that has reason." Life is often spoken of in terms of capacity and activity, and activity more fully describes the human function. So, Aristotle explains, we can more specifically describe the human function as "activity of the soul in accord with reason or requiring reason." Moreover, the function of the excellent person is to live this kind of life "well and finely."

In this passage, Aristotle points out that we can't understand the good unless we understand what human beings are for. Aristotle argues that the unique thing about human beings is our soul's ability to reason. Because activity particularly characterizes human life, we can then say that the soul's activity in accordance with reason is the particular function of human beings, in contrast to less sophisticated beings like plants and animals. In addition, this function should be performed "finely."

Each function is completed well "by being completed in accord with the virtue proper [to that kind of thing]." So, Aristotle reasons, the human good is "the activity of the soul in accord with virtue"—the best and most complete virtue, in a complete life.

When Aristotle talks about virtue, he refers to a state whereby something performs its intended function well. In the coming sections, he will unpack what it means for human beings to act virtuously.

Book 1, Chapter 8. Happiness also requires the addition of certain external resources, such as friends, wealth, or political power. In the same vein, the deprivation of certain things detracts from happiness—for example, lack of beauty, spouse, or children. In other words, a certain degree of prosperity is needed for happiness.

Aristotle acknowledges that attaining happiness is made harder or easier depending on certain external advantages or the lack of them.

Book 1, Chapter 9. How is happiness acquired? Though it's reasonable to say that happiness may be gifted by the gods in some sense, for the purposes of this discussion Aristotle says that happiness is the result of virtue and "some sort of learning or cultivation," which is available to anyone who has the capacity for virtue.

Aristotle isn't interested in happiness in a more metaphysical sense; he is concerned with the ways that humans can pursue happiness themselves through the active cultivation of virtue.

Book 1, Chapter 10. Aristotle takes his argument a step further by asserting that the happy person is the one whose activities not only accord with complete virtue, supported by adequate external goods, but also with a complete life.

Aristotle thinks that happiness is most likely to be found in a full or complete life. The idea of the "complete" is a thread that runs throughout the entirety of the Ethics.

Book 1, Chapter 11. While good or evil happening to one's friends or descendants after their death can be said in some measure to affect one's happiness, it doesn't do so to such a degree that a happy person would be made unhappy, or vice versa.

Aristotle says that misfortunes befalling one's acquaintances can reflect on the dead in some sense, but not in a way that ultimately detracts from the classification of a person as "happy" or not.

Book 1, Chapters 12-13. Because happiness is an activity of the soul in accord with complete virtue, Aristotle reasons that one must examine virtue in order to better understand happiness. First it's necessary to consider the nature of the soul, which has both a rational part and a nonrational part. Even the nonrational part—particularly the part with appetites and desires—shares in reason, though it does so in better or worse ways depending on the person. The difference between the parts of the soul accords with the difference between virtues. Some virtues are called virtues of thought (like wisdom, comprehension, and prudence), and some virtues are called virtues of character (like generosity and temperance).

To understand happiness, it's necessary to further break down the idea of virtue. The soul is both rational and nonrational, and even the nonrational parts must cooperate with the rational, to one degree or another. The rational parts can be classified as virtues of thought, and the ones that cooperate with the rational are virtues of character. These are arbitrary categorizations, of course—Aristotle's attempt to understand the complexity and potential of human nature.

BOOK 2

Book 2, Chapter 1. Aristotle outlines two sorts of virtue—virtue of thought and virtue of character. The first arises mostly from teaching and requires experience and time to mature. The second results from habit.

The Greek terms for both "character" and "habit" are actually the same word, ethos*—hence, "ethics." This sheds light on Aristotle's insistence that the best way to form one's character (*ethos*) is through the habitual (*ethos*) practice of virtues befitting ethical character.*

None of the virtues of character arise naturally. We're naturally able to acquire them, and they are completed in us by way of habit. Aristotle explains that virtues are acquired in much the same way as crafts are: "we become builders, for instance, by building, and we become harpists by playing the harp." Similarly, one becomes just or temperate by acting in a way that is just or temperate.

Virtues aren't natural to people, but must be nurtured through practice. One learns a craft by doing it and practicing it; the same holds true for acquiring virtues.

This is true collectively as well as individually. Legislators make citizens good by acclimating them to good behavior, and "correct habituation distinguishes a good political system from a bad one."

As he often does throughout the Ethics, *Aristotle repeats the point that what holds true for individuals is also applicable to societies. Political systems, in his view, serve the purpose of acclimating people to virtuous behavior, much as practice helps an individual acquire virtues.*

At the same time, the same things that develop a craft or a virtue can also destroy it. For example, bad harp-playing makes a bad harpist, and bad building makes a bad builder. That's why a teacher is needed—to ensure we're performing activities in the right way. In the exercise of virtues, too, the repetition of similar activities (habituation) rests upon and reinforces a state of character. So, then, performing activities rightly is very important, from one's youth onward.

Simply performing an activity mechanically doesn't cause someone to become adept in that activity. Just as a teacher is needed to guide the proper practice of a craft, so the correct state is needed—not the activity alone—to ensure that activities are being rightly performed throughout one's life.

Book 2, Chapter 2. Since the object of Aristotle's inquiry is to become good, it's necessary to consider the correct ways of acting, since these result in the states we acquire. First, "actions should accord with the correct reason."

Hearkening back to the definition of the function of the human being—the activity of the soul in accordance with reason—Aristotle begins to break down the constituent parts of virtue.

States "tend to be ruined by excess and deficiency." For instance, "excessive and deficient exercise ruin bodily strength […] whereas the proportionate amount produces, increases, and preserves it." The same is true of the virtues. If someone is afraid of everything, he becomes cowardly; if that person is afraid of nothing, he becomes rash. Virtues "are ruined by excess and deficiency, but preserved by the mean."

States are the dispositions, formed through habit, that enable the performance of virtues. Extremes ruin states, derailing virtue. Thus, figuring out the "mean"—the happy medium—between extremes is key to producing and preserving virtue.

Book 2, Chapter 3. Aristotle argues that someone's pleasure or pain following an action gives an indication of that person's state. For example, if someone enjoys abstaining from pleasures, he's moderate and levelheaded; if he's grieved by it, he's overindulgent. Pleasure can cause a person to do vulgar or corrupt actions, and pain causes a person to abstain from fine actions. Aristotle cites Plato's argument that the key to finding pleasure or pain in the right things is having had the right upbringing.

For Aristotle, pleasure and pain serve as indicators of a person's state, or disposition. But responding to pleasure and pain in virtuous ways—acting or abstaining according to what is base or fine—is something that requires training from one's youth.

Book 2, Chapter 4. Aristotle admits that his comparison between crafts and virtues doesn't hold in every way. For example, it's not enough that action in accordance with the virtues be done; the person who does the action must also be in the right state at the time—having decided to act accordingly and done the action "from a firm and unchanging state." By contrast, when someone is making something, the product is the only thing that matters.

Aristotle's point here is that, in contrast to making something, where the end product is all that matters, simply performing a virtuous act is not enough—it must be performed in a virtuous way. Recall that a state is a disposition formed by habitual action, so if a person is in a virtuous state, it means that they've repeatedly practiced being virtuous, and now it is a part of their character. In other words, rather than merely going through the motions of committing virtuous actions, one must also be virtuous.

Book 2, Chapter 5. Aristotle further examines what virtue is. He says there are "three conditions arising in the soul"—feelings, capacities, and states—and that virtue must be one of these. Feelings are things that have elements of both pleasure and pain, like appetite, anger, fear, and love. Capacities are "what we have when we are said to be capable of these feelings." States are "what we have when we are well or badly off in relation to feelings."

Aristotle considers three conditions in the soul. While feelings and capacities are fairly self-explanatory, a "state" is a condition whereby something is done well or poorly in relation to feelings. For example, if we experience intense anger, we're badly off in relation to that feeling, but if our anger is intermediate, then we're well off.

Neither virtues nor vices are feelings, then, says Aristotle. For example, we're praised or blamed for having virtues—having feelings in a particular way—not for simply *having* feelings. And we can't *decide* to have feelings, but virtues require decision. For the same reason, virtues can't be capacities, either—and no one is praised for being *capable* of feelings. Because virtues are neither feelings nor capacities, then, virtues must be states.

Aristotle argues that nobody is praised or blamed just for having feelings, or for having the capacity to feel things. Furthermore, while feelings and capacities are basically beyond human control, virtues are intentional—so they must be categorized under the remaining condition of the soul: states.

Book 2, Chapter 6. Having established that virtue is a state, then, we have to inquire what sort of state it is. Every virtue causes the person who has it "to be in a good state and to perform their functions well."

To some degree, states and virtues appear to be mutually reinforcing for Aristotle. States enable the performance of virtues, and virtues also create states whereby people perform their functions as they should.

Another aspect of the nature of virtue is that it's "neither superfluous nor deficient." Every branch of science "produces its products well, by focusing on what is intermediate" in this way. When it comes to virtues of character, seeking the intermediate state—or "mean"—involves "having these feelings at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way." Thus virtue "is a mean, insofar as it aims at what is intermediate." Excess and deficiency, on the other hand, are vices. Aristotle names various examples of virtues which he'll define with greater specificity in Book III.

Aristotle comes to a key component of his teaching on virtue—that virtue must aim at the intermediate state, or mean, between extremes of excess and deficiency. Again, mere action isn't sufficient; actions must be performed in a certain way in order to qualify as virtuous. Aristotle adds that not every action has a "mean"—it's not possible to commit adultery, for example, with the right person, for the right end, or in the right way. Such an action is itself *"base" and can never be virtuous.*

Book 2, Chapters 7-8. Aristotle illustrates the mean through an example of the overly confident person versus the overly fearful person. On one end of the extreme is the "excessively confident" person, who makes stupid decisions because they fear nothing. On the other hand, the person who is "excessive in fear" is a "coward." The mean that rests between extreme confidence and extreme fear is bravery.

In this passage, Aristotle highlights how the mean doesn't necessarily mean a behavior that is moderate—it's more like the right behavior or course of action in between two extremes.

Book 2, Chapter 9. Aristotle concludes Book II by saying that, in light of what's been discussed, it's "hard work to be excellent." It's hard to determine the mean in a given case. Since one extreme is generally worse than the other, it's best to aim for "the lesser of the evils." It's also necessary to determine which extreme one tends to drift into more naturally, excess or deficiency. And since all people are naturally inclined toward pleasure, it's good to be wary of "pleasure and its sources."

Aristotle acknowledges again that making virtuous decisions doesn't come naturally. Determining the mean, or middle ground, in a given situation requires discernment and self-awareness. As he warned earlier, there is no clear-cut method for becoming virtuous—just guidelines that must be thoughtfully engaged rather than mechanically followed.

BOOK 3

Book 3, Chapter 1. Aristotle discusses the preconditions of virtue. He begins by explaining that when we talk about virtue, we're talking about voluntary action, not involuntary action, which is forced or caused by ignorance.

Now that he's established what virtue is, Aristotle discusses various requirements for virtue. First of all, it must be voluntary.

Book 3, Chapter 2. Decision—as opposed to mere appetite, wish, or belief—is also proper to virtue. Because decision involves reason and thought, what is decided must first have been deliberated.

Here, Aristotle emphasizes that we must decide to act, and before we decide, we must deliberate.

Book 3, Chapter 3. According to Aristotle, deliberation typically concerns situations of uncertain outcome, when one must discern the right way to act. One "[lays] down the end" toward which one is striving (for example, a doctor aiming to cure, or an orator looking to persuade), "and then examine the ways and means to achieve it." If there are various possible means to an end, one must determine which way will be the easiest and finest. Deliberation comes to an end when we arrive at a definite decision on how to act.

Deliberation is a process of inquiry and analysis. It only applies in situations where there are multiple viable alternatives. To arrive at a decision, one must first be clear about one's aim, then consider the alternative ways of achieving it and which of these is best. Aristotle also notes that partners in deliberation are often needed "when we distrust our own ability to discern" without help.

Book 3, Chapters 4-5. Aristotle sums up the discussion thus: "We have found, then, that we wish for the end, and deliberate and decide about things that promote it; hence the actions concerned with things that promote the end are in accord with decision and are voluntary. The activities of the virtues are concerned with these things [that promote the end]." The upshot of this conclusion is that virtue (and vice) are up to us.

The voluntary nature of virtue has ramifications not just for the individual pursuit of virtue, but for communities and hence for law. According to Aristotle's approach, legislators must also determine the ends they desire and deliberate on the best ways to compel virtue and discourage vice by shaping people's decision-making.

Book 3, Chapters 6-7. Next Aristotle discusses individual virtues in turn, starting with bravery. Bravery is a mean between cowardice and rashness. A brave person may be afraid under the appropriate circumstances, but will stand firm in the face of fear "for the sake of the fine, since this is the end aimed at by virtue." While a cowardly person, a rash person, and a brave person are all concerned with the same things, then, they "have different states related to them; the others are excessive or defective," but the brave person achieves the mean.

In this part of the work, Aristotle undertakes more detailed discussions of specific virtues. Bravery is a good example of how virtues are more than just feelings. Being brave doesn't mean that someone isn't afraid, but one manages to maintain the proper state relative to fear, acting courageously without giving in to extremes of boldness or timidity.

Book 3, Chapters 8-9. There is also a difference between those who *seem* brave and those who are genuinely brave. For instance, a person who is confident and hopeful that they can achieve a good outcome may seem brave, but really they just "think they are stronger and nothing could happen to them." In contrast, a brave person will willingly endure pain and suffering and will actually feel "more pain" "at the prospect of death."

Aristotle continues to add nuance to his discussion of the mean, showing how what may look like the mean—in this case, bravery—isn't always the mean.

Book 3, Chapters 10-12. The virtue of temperance has to do with bodily pleasures. A temperate person finds no pleasure in the wrong things; in fact, he doesn't take intense pleasure in *any* bodily things, doesn't suffer pain in their absence, and has no more than a moderate appetite for them. In contrast, an intemperate person is driven by "appetite and desire."

Temperance doesn't mean that someone has no desire for things like food or sex, but that he has total mastery over his appetite and never overindulges. He has a moderate desire for things that don't detract from health, don't deviate from the fine, and don't exceed his means.

BOOK 4

Book 4, Chapter 1. Aristotle explains that the virtue of generosity has to do with the giving and taking of wealth. Its excesses are wastefulness and ungenerosity. The generous person gives correctly, in the right amounts, and to the right people. He gives in accordance with wealth rightly acquired, and always gives within his means.

The various aspects of generosity show just how complicated discerning the mean and deciding to act virtuously can be. One has to consider the object of giving, the appropriate gift, and the source of one's wealth. It's evident why deliberation is important, and that virtue isn't a matter of mechanically applying certain principles.

Book 4, Chapter 2. Magnificence, too, has to do with actions related to wealth, but only where "heavy expenses" are concerned. A "magnificent" person "only […] spends the worthy amount on a large purpose," not on a trivial purpose, and he does so "gladly and readily." He spends for honorable reasons (temples for the gods, for instance, or other things benefiting the common good). Even building a house befitting one's riches is magnificent, since it's a "suitable adornment." The extremes of this virtue are stinginess and vulgarity, or poor taste.

Magnificence differs from generosity in that, while all magnificent people are generous, not everyone who's generous is (or can be) magnificent. This virtue involves an eye for fittingness—the magnificent person knows how to spend appropriately, both in ways benefiting the common good and even in ways exhibiting his own wealth.

Book 4, Chapters 3-4. The virtue of magnanimity is concerned with "great things." The magnanimous person is one who both "thinks himself worthy of great things" and "is really worthy of them." The extremes related to this virtue are vanity (thinking one is worthy of more than they really are) and pusillanimity (thinking one is worthy of less). The "great things" with which a magnanimous person is mainly concerned are honors and dishonors. The magnanimous person, being worthy of the highest honors, is truly the best person, and magnanimity can be regarded as "a sort of adornment of the virtues."

Magnanimity is a virtue seldom seen, because magnanimity doesn't arise in a person unless he or she already possesses the other virtues; indeed, magnanimity makes those virtues greater. Part of what makes vanity and pusillanimity unvirtuous is that people with these vices don't know what they're worth, and accordingly, they don't know how to direct their lives appropriately.

Book 4, Chapter 5. The virtue of mildness is concerned with anger. A mild person "is angry at the right things and toward the right people, and also in the right way." Such a person isn't led by feeling and is quick to pardon when appropriate. Aristotle doesn't assign a name to the deficient extreme, but calls the excess "irascibility," which can manifest in quick-temperedness, bitterness, or irritability.

This virtue is a good example of how the mean isn't equivalent to moderation; instead, it is the intermediate state between excess and deficiency, the two extremes. In this case, anger is appropriate, as long as one's reason remains in control—such that one doesn't lash out quickly or refuse to forgive.

Book 4, Chapter 6. The virtue described as friendliness falls between the extremes of the "ingratiating" person and the cantankerous or quarrelsome person. The ingratiating person tries never to cause pain to another person, even when appropriate; the cantankerous person doesn't care about causing pain at any time. The friendly person always relates to those he or she meets according to what's fine or beneficial under the circumstances.

The virtue of friendliness is not the same thing as friendship (which Aristotle will discuss at length later), because it doesn't rest on fondness for a particular person; rather, it's concerned with relating to each person in the right way because of one's own character, not because of something in the other person.

Book 4, Chapters 7-9. Having the virtue of truthfulness means being direct, honest, and not embellishing the things one says. This person, who is opposite of a boaster, is "truthful both in what he says and how he lives." Similarly, the person with the virtue of wit will "say and listen to the right things and in the right way." Lastly, shame isn't a virtue, but it's important because it deters people from acting in the wrong way.

Once again, Aristotle brings up the idea of behaving in the right way, in the right amount, and at the right time.

BOOK 5

Book 5, Chapter 1. In Book V, Aristotle turns to questions about justice—namely, what sort of actions justice and injustice are concerned with, and what extremes justice is the mean between. Justice is concerned with what is lawful and fair, and injustice with what's lawless and unfair.

The virtue of justice is concerned with a broader range of scenarios than those previously discussed—with far-reaching implications for society—which is why Aristotle devotes an entire book to it.

In a larger sense, justice is concerned with everyone's benefit—what we call "just," Aristotle says, "is whatever produces and maintains happiness and its parts for a political community." The law procures such justice by requiring "actions in accord with the other virtues" and prohibiting those associated with vices.

Aristotle explicitly ties justice to the broader concerns of political science. Basically, anything that promotes societal happiness can fall under the heading of justice.

Aristotle says that this type of justice—well established in law—is "complete virtue." He quotes the proverb, "in justice all virtue is summed up." The reason justice is such "complete virtue" is that it's the exercise of the virtues "in relation to another, not only in what concerns [oneself]," something not everyone can achieve. In sum, "insofar as virtue is related to another, it is justice, and insofar as it is a certain sort of state without qualification, it is virtue."

Unlike the other virtues in isolation, justice looks out for the benefit of fellow members of the community. In fact, when any other virtue is exercised in relation to others, it can be properly classified as justice. That's why Aristotle considers justice a kind of summation of all virtue.

Book 5, Chapters 2-7. Aristotle discusses various "species" of the just. With regard to justice in distribution, the just is the intermediate between fair and unfair; it must be proportionate (seeking "equal shares for equal people"). In contrast, the just in transactions has to do with proportionality—the law's treatment of differences in harm inflicted and its attempt to restore a situation to equality (for example, in situations where theft, wounding, or death have occurred). In such cases, something must be subtracted from the one who has more and given to the one who has less. There is also justice in exchange—reciprocity—which holds **cities** together; currency helps maintain this kind of justice. Political justice pertains more broadly to maintaining a common life among equals.

Each of the "species" of justice named by Aristotle in some way seeks to maintain or restore fairness within a community. For example, justice in exchange is important because communities are sustained partly through people's exchange of goods with one another, a process which often requires equalization through price-setting.

Book 5, Chapters 8-9. The question of whether or not an act is voluntary helps to determine whether it's an instance of injustice or not—for example, if harm is inflicted beyond the "reasonable expectation" of the person causing it, then it's a misfortune, not an injustice. Factors like ignorance, and whether an act was committed in anger, also factor into deciding whether a harm is to be pardoned or not. Likewise, an act is not just unless there's been deliberation and a decision to act justly.

Aristotle's preconditions for virtue apply to questions of justice and law, too—since virtue must be voluntary, the question of a person's will and intent can help in judging whether justice or injustice have occurred.

Book 5, Chapters 10-11. Aristotle argues that decency is actually superior to justice. He claims that this is because a universal law sometimes falls short of being able to address every particular, and in such cases, decency makes up the deficiency in the law. A decent person, for example, might choose not to be "an exact stickler for justice in the bad way, but [takes] less than he might even though he has the law on his side."

Legislation cannot adequately address every scenario, and in such cases, the virtue of decency helps to set things right. Decency is basically a discerning attitude which understands that justice is bigger than the law. This is another example of the importance of wisdom, not assuming that virtues can be woodenly applied.

BOOK 6

Book 6, Chapters 1-2. Having discussed virtues of character, Aristotle turns to virtues of thought. As he did before discussing the other virtues, he reviews the components of the soul. Again, the soul has two parts: one rational, one nonrational. The rational part has scientific and rationally calculating—or deliberating—parts. The function of the rational part of the soul is truth; hence, the virtues of that part of the soul will be "the states that best direct it toward the truth."

As before, the soul's makeup and inner workings shape the practice of virtue. When dealing with virtues of character, Aristotle confined his discussion to the nonrational part of the soul; now, he examines the rational part, which in turn has both scientific and deliberating parts—which deal, respectively, with unchanging principles and things which admit of various possibilities.

Book 6, Chapters 3-6. Aristotle identifies five states in which the soul grasps the truth: scientific knowledge, craft knowledge, prudence, wisdom, and understanding. Both understanding and scientific knowledge are concerned with learnable principles that don't change. Craft knowledge is a state oriented toward producing something. Prudence is the ability to "deliberate finely […] about what sorts of things promote living well in general." Prudence is particularly about human concerns, "things open to deliberation." These things include both universals and particulars.

Just as states are relevant to virtues of character, so there are states that produce virtues of thought. For Aristotle's purposes, the most significant of these is prudence, which particularly has to do with deliberating about virtue.

Book 6, Chapters 7-13. Good deliberation, Aristotle explains, isn't just any sort of rational calculation; after all, a base person can deliberate correctly, but arrive at the conclusion he wishes to reach (which is a base one); whereas good deliberation must accord with what's beneficial. Prudence is important because virtue is a state in accord with correct reason, and prudence is correct reason in the area of virtue.

While anyone can engage in deliberation, only a virtuous person can deliberate well. That's because good deliberation depends on the virtue of prudence, which draws upon reason rather than on base desires.

BOOK 7

Book 7, Chapters 1-3. Aristotle turns his discussion to conditions of character to be avoided—vice, incontinence, and bestiality. He focuses particularly on incontinence, which is the opposite of self-restraint. The condition of incontinence and the vice of intemperance aren't quite the same things, he explains. The difference is that an intemperate person always thinks it's right "to pursue the pleasant thing at hand," whereas the incontinent person knows it's wrong to pursue that thing, yet does so anyway.

Book VII focuses on impediments to virtue, not all of which are simply vices. Whereas someone who's intemperate fails to act according to reason and so doesn't recognize that they're being self-indulgent, an incontinent person is able to deliberate and choose to act virtuously, yet fails to follow through because of insufficient self-restraint.

Book 7, Chapters 4-9. Continence and incontinence have to do with pleasures and pains. Aristotle explains that incontinence can't be classified with "bestial" behaviors, which often result from disease, madness, or abuse. And unlike the viciously intemperate person, who's incurable, the incontinent person *is* curable. The intemperate person doesn't even recognize his or her vice, but the incontinent person recognizes and regrets their lack of restraint. Among incontinent people, those who impetuously give themselves over to desire are better than those who reason but don't abide by their reason, since the latter deliberate and still act against their decision.

Aristotle continues to compare incontinence to other impediments to virtue. In many ways, incontinence isn't as grave a condition as intemperance, since, again, an intemperate person doesn't see the need for reform. Incontinence itself shows up in better and worse forms. The impetuous person, who doesn't take the time to reason before indulging himself, is easier to deal with than the person who knowingly acts against a deliberate choice.

Book 7, Chapter 10. Aristotle adds that an incontinent person cannot be prudent at the same time, because prudent people act on their knowledge, but incontinent people don't; they are more like someone who is asleep or drunk. Aristotle explains that "The incontinent person is like a **city** that votes for all the right decrees and has excellent laws, but does not apply them." The person who doesn't deliberate is easier to cure through habituation than the weak person who doesn't stick to the results of their deliberation.

Aristotle closes his discussion of incontinence by comparing an incontinent person to a city that knows how it should govern itself, but doesn't put that knowledge into practice. As usual, broader applications of individual virtue are never far from Aristotle's thought. Habituation can reform an incontinent person, but this is actually far easier in the case of the person who doesn't deliberate; unlike the one who neglects to stick to their decisions, an impetuous person can more readily learn to develop prudence.

Book 7, Chapters 11-12. Aristotle briefly discusses pleasure, which he says is important because virtues have to do with pain and pleasure, and most people associate pleasure with happiness. While some argue that pleasure is not a good at all, Aristotle argues that just because something might not be good without qualification, that doesn't mean it isn't good for certain people on certain occasions. Clearly, even the temperate person doesn't avoid *all* pleasures.

Aristotle says that most people have a superficial understanding of pleasure. Some confuse pleasure with happiness. Others claim that pleasure is bad altogether. Aristotle argues for greater nuance—a qualified good is still a good.

Book 7, Chapter 13. Aristotle further argues that because pain is evidently bad, both in an unqualified sense and because it impedes other activities, we know that pleasure, its opposite, must be good. And if pleasure is bad, it doesn't make sense to say that a happy person, who presumably enjoys pleasures, has a better life than anyone else.

Aristotle makes a few additional observations in favor of pleasure as a qualified good. For one thing, we wouldn't see pain as such an evil if pleasure weren't in some sense good.

Book 7, Chapter 14. Finally, while there are more types of pleasure than bodily pleasures, human beings seem to be especially drawn to bodily pleasures because our perishable nature is attracted to change. The gods, by contrast, don't change; they enjoy one simple, unchanging pleasure.

It's true that people seem to conflate all pleasures with bodily pleasures; this is because, unlike the gods, we have *bodies, which change and experience sensations. Pleasure is uncomplicated for divine beings.*

BOOK 8

Book 8, Chapter 1. Aristotle turns to a discussion of friendship, which is itself a virtue, or at least involves virtue. It's also a necessity for life—rich and poor, young and old, all people need friends. Parents and children also have a natural friendship with one another, not only among humans, but among animal species as well.

Friendship will occupy a significant role in Nicomachean Ethics. *At this point in Aristotle's discussion, there is a pronounced shift from a focus on the individual pursuit of virtue to the role of virtue in relationships and communities.*

Friendship holds **cities** together, and legislators seem to be even more concerned about friendship than about justice. That's because concord, which is the goal of legislators, is very similar to friendship. So where friendship exists, there's no need for justice.

Friendship—which Aristotle understands in a broader sense than mere affectionate bonds (it pertains to relationships between fellow citizens, for example)—is the fabric of society. When people enjoy harmonious relationships, injustices don't occur, so the necessity for law is much reduced.

Book 8, Chapter 2. Aristotle defines friendship as "reciprocated goodwill," of which there are three types. The first is friendship for utility or pleasure, in which a friend is loved insofar as he or she is useful, not for who they are. Such friendships, which are common among older people, are easily dissolved once people can no longer derive some benefit from one another. An example of such a friendship is the relationship between a host and a guest.

That friendships for utility are more common among an older crowd suggests that older people are more interested in pursuing things that will directly benefit them. He also classifies the host and guest relationship under this type of friendship. Imagine the relationship between a hotel manager and a hotel guest—both are getting something from one another (money or lodgings), and the "friendship" is short-lived and ends when the guest's stay does.

Book 8, Chapter 3. The second type of friendship that Aristotle describes is friendship for pleasure. This type is especially common among young people, because they tend to be guided by their feelings. This type of friendship can shift often, because people's idea of what's pleasant changes as they grow older. An example of a friendship for pleasure is one hinging on erotic passion.

Whereas older people are more inclined to friendships of utility, Aristotle thinks that young people tend to pursue pleasure-based friendships—in other words, while older people use their head and pursue practical, utilitarian relationships, younger people use their heart and pursue relationships built on the flimsy foundation of feelings.

The third type of friendship that Aristotle outlines is "complete" friendship, which occurs between people who are similar in virtue. Such people are good in their own right and wish good things for one another for each other's own sake. Such friendships last as long as the respective friends are good, "and virtue is enduring." Complete friendships are rare, since virtuous people are hard to find, and such friendships need time and testing in order to take root.

This third type of friendship is the truest and most lasting type, in Aristotle's view, because the friends are not loved incidentally, nor for advantages or pleasures they can give, but for themselves. It's only possible between people who've attained a comparable level of virtue, and is correspondingly rare.

Book 8, Chapter 4. Aristotle acknowledges that "incomplete" friendships bear some resemblance to "complete" friendships. For example, mutual pleasure and usefulness are still present in complete friendships. And when both people derive what they want from a utilitarian or pleasure-based friendship, these can last for a long time. But even in an erotic relationship, for instance, friendship can dissolve when a beloved's bloom fades, showing that the two were never fully friends, but interested in what they could gain from one another (particularly the lover from the beloved).

Aristotle doesn't say that "incomplete" friendships are worthless. Rather, these friendships can be enjoyable and beneficial, but they are unlikely to endure much beyond a given season of life. Ultimately, friendships between virtuous people are full friendships, but the other types of friendship only resemble on the surface this kind of substantial friendship.

Book 8, Chapter 5-6. Aristotle also clarifies that while loving is a feeling, friendship is a state. Friendship requires decision, which comes from a state; and a virtuous person "[wishes] good to the beloved for his own sake in accord with their state, not their feeling." Also, the friendship of good people is one of equality. This is because a good person wishes the same good for his friend that he desires for himself. It isn't possible to have complete friendship with many people, since it is difficult and time-consuming to develop the familiarity necessary for such a friendship.

Much like virtue, true friendship is based on more than feelings. Between virtuous people, friendship is based primarily on a continual wishing of good to one another, and this goodwill is founded on the friends' equality. Complete friendship is rare, however, both because good people are rare and because of the steep commitment required to nurture friendship.

Book 8, Chapter 7. Aristotle says that a different type of friendship is that which "rests on superiority"—like, for instance, the relationship between a father and son, an older person and younger person, a man and a woman, and a ruler and the ruled. These friendships are unequal, and loving must be proportional, with the "better" and more beneficial person being loved more than he loves. To Aristotle, when "loving accords with the comparative worth of the friends, equality is achieved in a way."

Aristotle believes that complete friendship isn't possible between certain "unequal" pairings of people. Men—older and authoritative men in particular—are "better" in Aristotle's view and hence worthier of love. If the "superior" person is loved proportionally more in such friendships, then a kind of equality is possible.

Book 8, Chapter 8. Friendship, then, is more about loving than being loved, and "loving is the virtue of friends." Aristotle once again emphasizes that similarity in virtue is essential for long-lasting friendship. Because people who give in to vice lack the firmness of virtue, their friendships don't have the enduring quality of true friendship founded on virtue.

Regardless of the friendship pairing, loving is more important than being loved in Aristotle's view. And virtue—because of its inherent stability, is most important of all; relationships without virtue cannot have the same staying power.

Book 8, Chapter 9. To Aristotle, Friendship and justice are about the same things and are found in the same people. Because friendship involves some sort of life shared in common, we can say that friendship involves community. The degree of shared life, and what is just or unjust, varies among different sorts of friends. However, all of these, whatever their differences, are parts of the political community, seeking some advantage in common. And these smaller communities—families, tribes, societies, and so on—are subordinate to the larger political community, since they seek "advantage[s] close at hand," while the broader political community (the **city**) seeks the good of all.

Aristotle begins to tie friendship more explicitly to the life of the community. The ties found among virtuous friends, in all their variety, form the building blocks of larger communities, and these sub-communities are the foundations of cities. Aristotle sees parallels between the inner workings of friendships and the dynamics in political systems.

Book 8, Chapter 10. There are three types of political systems: kingship, aristocracy, and timocracy. Each of these has a deviant form. The deviation from kingship is tyranny, in which the tyrant seeks his own advantage, whereas the king seeks the advantage of his subjects. The deviation from aristocracy (rule of the best) is oligarchy (rule of the few). In an oligarchy, goods are unjustly distributed, and the wealthiest are favored. Timocracy (rule of those with property) descends into democracy (rule of the majority), which is the least "vicious" deviation, since democracy is still close to being a legitimate political system.

Aristotle's discussion of political systems and their distortions seems like a slight digression, but he always views the exercise of personal virtues as applicable to the life of the city as a whole, and vice versa. In a way, friendships are political systems in microcosm, as he goes on to explain.

Aristotle points out that these three political systems have a sort of echo within families. For instance, the community of a father and his sons has a kingship structure, which can become tyrannical. The community of a man and a woman is like an aristocracy, which can become an oligarchy if the man controls everything. A timocracy is closest to a community of brothers.

It's worth noting that, echoing the prejudices of his time, Aristotle believes that the man is the inherently worthy "ruler" over a woman.

©2020 LitCharts LLC

Book 8, Chapters 11-12. Friendship appears in the three political systems as long as these systems are just. A king's friendship with his subjects involves "superior beneficence." Relationships between parents and children or ancestors and descendants are "friendships of superiority," too. The friendship between man and woman assigns "more good to the better" (the man). According to Aristotle, it's not really possible to talk of equality in relationships between ruler and ruled, because they have "nothing in common," like the craftsman and his tool or the soul and the body. This also applies master and slave, "since a slave is a tool with a soul, while a tool is a slave without a soul." Yet it's possible to have friendship with a slave "insofar as he is a human being."

Aristotle explains how friendship maps onto various political structures. Because he believes that true friendship is founded on equality, which in turn is based on similarity in virtue, he holds that there's an inherent hierarchy in many human relationships. He doesn't see men and women or masters and slaves as equally capable of virtue. He does acknowledge the humanity of both of the "lesser" parties in such relationships, but it's not hard to see the potential for exploitation on both personal and political levels.

Book 8, Chapters 13-14. Aristotle notes that disputes are most common in friendships for utility, because people are inclined to want more and to think they're getting less than they deserve. Sometimes such friendships are formed with explicit conditions and sometimes not, but either way, there's a built-in instability. In friendships for virtue, disputes don't occur, because the friends' eagerness to benefit one another is proper to virtue and to friendship. And friendships for pleasure lack dispute as long as each friend is getting what they want.

Aristotle concludes this book by summing up the potential for disputes in the various kinds of friendships. Again, any relationships that aren't founded on virtue and mutual goodwill are inherently unstable. Because complete friendships are based on the virtuous life—the ultimate happiness—they're desirable for their own sake, and there's opportunity for conflict than in relationships pursued for other ends.

BOOK 9

Book 9, Chapter 1. In friendships with dissimilar aims, Aristotle says, there has to be an equalizer of some sort; for example, in political friendship, money is the common measure, governing the exchange between a cobbler or a weaver and their customers. Any friendship that can't achieve this sort of proportionality—such as a friendship in which one person loves for pleasure and the other for utility—will be inherently unstable. But because virtuous friendship "is friendship itself," it endures.

This section underlines the fact that Aristotle's understanding of friendship is fairly expansive. While the relationship between a tradesman and a customer wouldn't be considered "friendship" in most contexts, Aristotle views it as a form of reciprocal goodwill that undergirds society, albeit one requiring the "equalizer" of currency.

Book 9, Chapter 2. Determining what different kinds of friends owe to one another is not an exact pursuit. Parents are owed certain kinds of honor and support, but different kinds of honor are owed to fathers and mothers, and likewise we don't honor parents in the same way we'd honor a wise person or a general. As far as possible, we should try to accord to each person—whether "kinsfolk, fellow tribesmen, or fellow citizens"—what is proper, "as befits closeness of relation, virtue, or usefulness."

Like the individual pursuit of virtue, relationships require their own deliberation and decision-making. One must determine what honor should look like in each context, depending on the relative station and level of virtue of the parties involved.

©2020 LitCharts LLC

Book 9, Chapter 3. Aristotle points out that there is also the question of dissolving friendships when a friend proves to have changed. Friends are at odds when they are not friends in the way they think they are (for instance, if someone pretends to like us for our character but it turns out they're using us for personal advantage). If a friend starts out as a good person but turns to vice, it's impossible to continue loving him, since only the good is loveable. It makes sense to end a friendship in this case, especially if someone has turned "incurably vicious" such that his character can't be rescued.

Even friendships that are initially founded on virtue won't necessarily endure forever, Aristotle says. Only the good can be loved, so a friend who's turned from virtue to vice is, by definition, no longer loveable.

On the other hand, if one friend comes to far excel the other friend in virtue, they cannot remain friends, either. Aristotle says that this is often the case when people become friends in childhood but then grow apart—"for if one friend still thinks as a child, while the other becomes a man of the best sort, how could they still be friends?"

Similarly, when one friend exceeds another in the attainment of virtue, the basis for friendship dissolves. Once again, Aristotle emphasizes the importance of equal virtue among friends for the most lasting, substantial friendship.

Book 9, Chapter 4. Aristotle adds that the best qualities of friendship are also found in the decent person's relationship with himself. After all, he desires good for himself, finds his own company pleasant, and shares in his own distresses and pleasures. Vicious people's souls, on the other hand, are in conflict, torn between distress and pleasure over their actions, and thus can't maintain a friendly attitude even toward themselves, much less toward others.

Friendship is a reflection of the virtuous person's relationship with himself. Interestingly, this means that a vicious person can't even have a consistently positive relationship with himself, which explains why, in Aristotle's view, that person can't have real friends or be of much benefit to society.

Book 9, Chapter 5. Goodwill isn't the same thing as friendship, Aristotle claims, because it arises even toward people we don't know. It is more superficial than the loving upon which friendship is based. However, it can be the beginning of friendship, when one sees virtue or decency in another, just as the appealing sight of someone might be the beginning of an erotic passion. Goodwill, then, might be called a kind of inactive friendship, which can grow into genuine friendship if it lasts.

According to Aristotle, goodwill is the initial spark of friendship, much like an early spark of sexual attraction between future lovers. Goodwill isn't a sufficient basis for an enduring friendship by itself, but friendship can't begin without it.

Book 9, Chapter 6-7. Concord is another feature of friendship. Concord applies more specifically to political friendship—like among citizens of a **city**—because it's concerned with questions about big things affecting society.

An example of concord is when citizens of a city agree on what's best, make a decision, and act together on that decision (like an election or an alliance).

Book 9, Chapter 8. Aristotle argues that there is a type of self-love which is justifiably reproached—those who overreach in acquiring bodily pleasures to gratify their appetites. Someone who truly loves himself, however, whose actions are guided by reason, is above reproach. Thus, in this sense, a good person must be a self-lover, since his fine actions benefit both himself and others.

Here Aristotle draws a distinction between selfishness and self-love. Someone who loves himself according to reason (that is, according to virtue) is capable of loving others well; presumably, someone who's simply self-indulgent is not.

Book 9, Chapter 9. It might be asked whether a happy person needs friends or not, since he is assumed to be self-sufficient. But if having friends is indeed the greatest external good, then it's a necessity; moreover, a good person needs someone to benefit, hence he needs friends. Aristotle also assumes that the human being "is a political [animal], tending by nature to live together" with others. So a happy person does need friends.

Aristotle argues that friends are the greatest external good (one of those things that facilitates a person's happiness), so they are necessary. He also believes that people are designed to have close relationships, making friendship indispensable.

Aristotle explains that the happy person finds pleasure in the actions of other excellent people, and it's easier to pursue virtues in the company of others than in solitude; hence, "good people's life together allows the cultivation of virtue," another reason that friends are a necessity. A friend's being is desirable in much the same way that one's own existence is desirable for oneself. Friends enjoy and benefit from one another's existence not merely from existing side by side, like "grazing animals," but by sharing conversation and thought.

This is the crux of Aristotle's argument about friendship: virtues are best practiced in community, so friendship is not only founded on virtue, but is the ideal proving ground for virtues, making it vital to the flourishing of society as well. Human beings aren't meant to live side by side in isolation, but to engage in vibrant social life together.

Book 9, Chapter 10. How many friends, then, are needed? When it comes to friends for utility or pleasure, just a few are sufficient. However, it doesn't follow that it's good to have as many excellent and virtuous friends as possible. Aristotle says that the appropriate number of such friends is "the largest number with whom you could live together." Being extremely close to lots of people doesn't seem achievable.

By "living together," Aristotle means precisely what he talked about earlier—not necessarily physical cohabiting, but sharing conversation and ideas, as well as the other pleasures and pains of life. It logically follows that true friendship with more than a few people is not possible.

Book 9, Chapter 11. According to Aristotle, it's better to have friends in good fortune than in ill fortune. While it lightens our burden when a friend shares our distress, it's also painful to be aware of a friend's pain, so we shouldn't desire to cause a friend that. It's much more pleasant to share goods with our friends. At the same time, we should be quick to seek to benefit our friends and to go to them when they're in trouble.

Aristotle argues that we should be careful to not cause pain to friends in any way, even by seeking their companionship in our own distress. We should be willing, however, to support them in their own troubles and always be on the lookout for ways to benefit them.

Book 9, Chapter 12. What friends enjoy most of all is living in community together. Whatever someone regards as the end for which he lives, he wishes to share with his friend, whether that's drinking, hunting, or philosophy. This shows, once again, why the friendship of base people only increases their vice, and why the connection of virtuous people only strengthens their virtue.

From Aristotle's understanding of life in community, it's easy to see why friendship is so vital to the formation of virtues, and also why it can easily reinforce vices. Obviously, philosophy is the ideal "end" for friends to pursue in common.

BOOK 10

Book 10, Chapters 1-5. Aristotle next discusses pleasure, because "enjoying and hating the right things seems to be most important for virtue of character." People decide on pleasant things and avoid painful things throughout their lives. He rehashes many of the points he made earlier about pleasure, concluding that pleasure in and of itself isn't the ultimate good, that not every pleasure is "choiceworthy," and that some pleasures are choiceworthy in themselves. Pleasure is not a process, but something that is complete at any time. It arises through some activity and completes every activity. The most fully human pleasures are those which "complete the activities of the complete and blessedly happy man."

Aristotle has discussed pleasure earlier in the Ethics. *Here he underscores the importance of people's attitudes about pleasures and pains for the development of virtue. Pleasures aren't necessarily good in and of themselves, but when people have a virtuous attitude about them, they enhance one's happiness.*

Book 10, Chapter 6. Since happiness is the end of human striving, it's necessary to discuss the nature of happiness a bit further. First, happiness is an activity, not a state. It is choiceworthy in its own right, if nothing further apart from happiness is sought. The most choiceworthy activities for the blessed person are those concerning virtue. From this, we know that happiness isn't to be found in mere amusement, but in activities in accord with virtue.

Happiness is something a person does. For the virtuous person, all activities according with reason also promote happiness. This contrasts with the average person's conflation of happiness with pleasure or amusement.

Aristotle notes that since it's the case that happiness is activity in accord with virtue, it must accord with the supreme virtue, which is understanding, particularly understanding of the fine and divine—hence the greatest happiness is found in study. Study is something which is enjoyed for its own sake, and it aims at no higher aim; it's characterized by leisure, and it deepens one's pleasure the more it is pursued. So complete happiness is to be found in this activity.

Somewhat unexpectedly, Aristotle turns from his discussion of friendship to the claim that philosophical study is actually life's highest pleasure. But there's not necessarily a conflict here; as the founder of a philosophical school, Aristotle certainly didn't believe that study should be pursued alone.

Book 10, Chapter 7. Aristotle suggests that someone who lives a life of study "has a divine element in him." Even though we are mortal, we should seek to live in accord with our immortal element as much as we can. But understanding is also the controlling element of a human being, so from this perspective, too, the life of study is the supreme and happiest life. The person "whose activity accords with understanding," then, would seem to have the happiest life and also to be loved by the gods.

Understanding is the pinnacle of human reason and also the element of humanity that most closely connects them to the gods, Aristotle thinks. This is why study makes for the happiest life.

Book 10, Chapter 8. Having said this, Aristotle can't end his discussion here, because it isn't enough to study virtue, but to act on what one has learned. Aristotle explains that mere arguments about virtue aren't enough to make people behave decently. Most people live by their feelings, pursuing pleasures and avoiding pains, and they don't have a taste for the fine and truly pleasant. Argument alone can't reform people with such ingrained habits.

Aristotle explains that most people can't achieve the kind of virtuous life he's spent the entire work outlining; they don't have an intrinsic taste for it. Argument can only do so much for people who live according to their feelings instead of their reason.

Book 10, Chapter 9. While nature plays a role in making people good, and teaching has an impact on some, the soul of any student "needs to have been prepared by habit for enjoying or hating finely, like ground that is to nourish seed." After all, someone who's accustomed to living according to his feelings won't listen to or even understand an argument, much less be persuaded to change. In other words, to attain virtue, "we must already in some way have a character […] fond of what is fine and objecting to what is shameful."

Aristotle reiterates that in order for a person to become virtuous, their soul already needs to have been primed for virtue through appreciation of what's fine and rejection of what's shameful. Without that preparation of the "soil" of the soul, arguments are of no avail.

Someone will not have been trained in such a character, however, if he hasn't been brought up under appropriate laws. Laws, then, must "prescribe their upbringing and practices," so that, from their youth, people will grow accustomed to virtue and won't find it painful. But, from Aristotle's perspective, obeying these laws in youth isn't enough; habituation to virtue is still needed as people become adults, so laws are needed throughout life.

Throughout the Ethics, *Aristotle has repeatedly touched on the importance of virtue for the flourishing of society, not just the individual. Now he explains that, in order for people's souls to be prepared for virtue throughout their lives, appropriate laws must be imposed and enforced.*

This is why it's the job of legislators to "urge people toward virtue and exhort them to aim at the fine," and to impose corrective treatments and penalties on anyone who disobeys or lacks the right nature to obey. They must also expel those who are incurable. Someone who's brought up, habituated, and who follows decent practices throughout life can become good.

While not everyone will prove themselves capable of responding to the formative power of law—the irredeemable few will need to be removed from society, in fact—Aristotle believes that most people who are brought up under a system of sound law can be successfully guided toward virtue.

Aristotle argues that law can compel in a way that a parent's or teacher's instructions can't. So it makes sense for the community to pay attention to people's upbringing. Therefore it's necessary to know how to create excellent laws. Even though individual treatment is needed in order for people to grow in virtue, one can't attend to particulars without understanding universals. So someone who wishes to make people good should study legislative science. This is done by studying collections of laws and political systems—determining which system is best, how best it should be organized, "and what habits and laws it should follow." "Let us discuss this," Aristotle concludes, "from the beginning."

Nicomachean Ethics *ends with Aristotle's charge to study legislative science—really a subset of political science—in order to create communities that are oriented toward virtue, goodness, and happiness. Though the text ends somewhat abruptly, this is because Aristotle intended to follow up his lectures on ethics with lectures evaluating laws and political systems—as in fact he did, in the companion treatise,* Politics.

©2020 LitCharts LLC

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Patterson-White, Sarah. "*Nicomachean Ethics*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 14 Jun 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Patterson-White, Sarah. "*Nicomachean Ethics*." LitCharts LLC, June 14, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/nicomachean-ethics.

To cite any of the quotes from *Nicomachean Ethics* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics. Hackett. 1999.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett. 1999.