

Nicomachean Ethics

by Aristotle
(384–322 B.C.)

1 IT IS NOT UNREASONABLE that men should derive their concept of the good and
of happiness from the lives which they lead. The common run of people and the
most vulgar identify it with pleasure, and for that reason are satisfied with a life of
enjoyment. For the most notable kinds of life are three: the life just mentioned, the
5 political life, and the contemplative life.

The common run of people, as we saw, betray their utter slavishness in their
preference for a life suitable to cattle; but their views seem plausible because many
people in high places share the feelings of Sardanapallus. Cultivated and active
men, on the other hand, believe the good to be honor, for honor, one might say,
10 is the end of the political life. But this is clearly too superficial an answer: for honor
seems to depend on those who confer it rather than on him who receives it,
whereas our guess is that the good is a man's own possession which cannot easily
be taken away from him. Furthermore, men seem to pursue honor to assure
themselves of their own worth; at any rate, they seek to be honored by sensible men
15 and by those who know them, and they want to be honored on the basis of their
virtue or excellence. Obviously, then, excellence, as far as they are concerned, is
better than honor. One might perhaps even go so far as to consider excellence
rather than honor as the end of political life. However, even excellence proves to
be imperfect as an end: for a man might possibly possess it while asleep or while
20 being inactive all his life, and while, in addition, undergoing the greatest suffering
and misfortune. Nobody would call the life of such a man happy, except for the
sake of maintaining an argument. . . . In the third place there is the contemplative
life, which we shall examine later on. As for the money-maker, his life is led under
some kind of constraint: clearly, wealth is not the good which we are trying to find,
25 for it is only useful, i.e., it is a means to something else. Hence one might regard
the aforementioned objects as ends, since they are valued for their own sake. But
even they prove not to be the good, though many words have been wasted to show
that they are. Accordingly, we may dismiss them.

30 LET US RETURN AGAIN to our investigation into the nature of the good which
we are seeking. It is evidently something different in different actions and in each
art: it is one thing in medicine, another in strategy, and another again in each of

1 the other arts. What, then, is the good of each? Is it not that for the sake of which
 everything else is done? That means it is health in the case of medicine, victory in
 the case of strategy, a house in the case of building, a different thing in the case of
 different arts, and in all actions and choices it is the end. For it is for the sake of
 5 the end that all else is done. Thus, if there is some one end for all that we do, this
 would be the good attainable by action; if there are several ends, they will be the
 goods attainable by action.

. . . Since there are evidently several ends, and since we choose some of these—
 e.g., wealth, flutes, and instruments generally—as a means to something else, it is
 10 obvious that not all ends are final. The highest good, on the other hand, must be
 something final. Thus, if there is only one final end, this will be the good we are
 seeking; if there are several, it will be the most final and perfect of them. We call
 that which is pursued as an end in itself more final than an end which is pursued
 for the sake of something else; and what is never chosen as a means to something
 15 else we call more final than that which is chosen both as an end in itself and as a
 means to something else. What is always chosen as an end in itself and never as
 a means to something else is called final in an unqualified sense. This description
 seems to apply to happiness above all else: for we always choose happiness as an
 end in itself and never for the sake of something else. Honor, pleasure, intelligence,
 20 and all virtue we choose partly for themselves—for we would choose each of them
 even if no further advantage would accrue from them—but we also choose them
 partly for the sake of happiness, because we assume that it is through them that
 we will be happy. On the other hand, no one chooses happiness for the sake of
 honor, pleasure, and the like, nor as a means to anything at all.

25 We arrive at the same conclusion if we approach the question from the
 standpoint of self-sufficiency. For the final and perfect good seems to be self-
 sufficient. However, we define something as self-sufficient not by reference to the
 “self” alone. We do not mean a man who lives his life in isolation, but a man who
 also lives with parents, children, a wife, and friends and fellow citizens generally,
 30 since man is by nature a social and political being. But some limit must be set to
 these relationships; for if they are extended to include ancestors, descendants, and
 friends of friends, they will go on to infinity. . . . For the present we define as “self-
 sufficient” that which taken by itself makes life something desirable and deficient
 in nothing. It is happiness, in our opinion, which fits this description. Moreover,
 35 happiness is of all things the one most desirable, and it is not counted as one good
 thing among many others. But if it were counted as one among many others, it is
 obvious that the addition of even the least of the goods would make it more
 desirable; for the addition would produce an extra amount of good, and the greater
 amount of good is always more desirable than the lesser. We see then that
 40 happiness is something final and self-sufficient and the end of our actions.

IT MAY BE SAID that every individual man and all men in common aim at a certain
 end which determines what they choose and what they avoid. This end, to sum it

1 up briefly, is happiness and its constituents. Let us, then, by way of illustration
 only, ascertain what is in general the nature of happiness, and what are the
 elements of its constituent parts. For all advice to do things or not to do them is
 concerned with happiness and with the things that make for or against it; whatever
 5 creates or increases happiness or some part of happiness, we ought to do; whatever
 destroys or hampers happiness, or gives rise to its opposite, we ought not to do.

We may define happiness as prosperity combined with virtue; or as independence
 of life; or as the secure enjoyment of the maximum of pleasure; or as a good
 condition of property and body, together with the power of guarding one's
 10 property and body and making use of them. That happiness is one or more of these
 things, pretty well everybody agrees.

From this definition of happiness it follows that its constituent parts are: good
 birth, plenty of friends, good friends, wealth, good children, plenty of children, a
 happy old age, also such bodily excellences as health, beauty, strength, large
 15 stature, athletic powers, together with fame, honor, good luck, and virtue. A man
 cannot fail to be completely independent if he possesses these internal and these
 external goods; for besides these there are no others to have. (Goods of the soul
 and of the body are internal. Good birth, friends, money, and honor are external.)
 Further, we think that he should possess resources and luck, in order to make his
 20 life really secure. . . .

To call happiness the highest good is perhaps a little trite, and a clearer account
 of what it is is still required. Perhaps this is best done by first ascertaining the
 proper function of man. For just as the goodness and performance of a flute player,
 a sculptor, or any kind of expert, and generally of anyone who fulfills some
 25 function or performs some action, are thought to reside in his proper function, so
 the goodness and performance of man would seem to reside in whatever is his
 proper function. Is it then possible that while a carpenter and a shoemaker have
 their own proper functions and spheres of action, man as man has none, but was
 left by nature a good-for-nothing without a function? Should we not assume that
 30 just as the eye, the hand, the foot, and in general each part of the body clearly has
 its own proper function, so man too has some function over and above the
 functions of his parts? What can this function possibly be? Simply living? He
 shares that even with plants, but we are now looking for something peculiar to
 man. Accordingly, the life of nutrition and growth must be excluded. Next in line
 35 there is a life of sense perception. But this, too, man has in common with the horse,
 the ox, and every animal. There remains then an active life of the rational element.
 The rational element has two parts: one is rational in that it obeys the rule of reason,
 the other in that it possesses and conceives rational rules. Since the expression "life
 of the rational element" also can be used in two senses, we must make it clear that
 40 we mean a life determined by the activity, as opposed to the mere possession, of
 the rational element. For the activity, it seems, has a greater claim to be the
 function of man.

1 The proper function of man, then, consists in an activity of the soul in conformity with a rational principle or, at least, not without it. In speaking of the proper function of a given individual we mean that it is the same in kind as the function of an individual who sets high standards for himself: the proper function
 5 of a harpist, for example, is the same as the function of a harpist who has set high standards for himself. The same applies to any and every group of individuals: the full attainment of excellence must be added to the mere function. In other words, the function of the harpist is to play the harp; the function of the harpist who has high standards is to play it well. On these assumptions, if we take the proper
 10 function of man to be a certain kind of life, and if this kind of life is an activity of the soul and consists in actions performed in conjunction with the rational element, and if a man of high standards is he who performs these actions well and properly, and if a function is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the excellence appropriate to it; we reach the conclusion that the good of man
 15 is an activity of the soul in conformity with excellence or virtue, and if there are several virtues, in conformity with the best and most complete.

But we must add “in a complete life.” For one swallow does not make a spring, nor does one sunny day; similarly, one day or a short time does not make a man blessed and happy.

20 NOW, IF HAPPINESS is activity in conformity with virtue, it is to be expected that it should conform with the highest virtue, and that is the virtue of the best part of us. Whether this is intelligence or something else which, it is thought, by its very nature rules and guides us and which gives us our notions of what is noble and
 25 divine; whether it is itself divine or the most divine thing in us; it is the activity of this part [when operating] in conformity with the excellence or virtue proper to it that will be complete happiness. That it is an activity concerned with theoretical knowledge or contemplation has already been stated.

This would seem to be consistent with our earlier statements as well as the
 30 truth. For this activity is not only the highest—for intelligence is the highest possession we have in us, and the objects which are the concern of intelligence are the highest objects of knowledge—but also the most continuous: we are able to study continuously more easily than to perform any kind of action. Furthermore, we think of pleasure as a necessary ingredient in happiness. Now everyone agrees
 35 that of all the activities that conform with virtue activity in conformity with theoretical wisdom is the most pleasant. At any rate, it seems that [the pursuit of wisdom or] philosophy holds pleasures marvelous in purity and certainty, and it is not surprising that time spent in knowledge is more pleasant than time spent in research. Moreover, what is usually called “self-sufficiency” will be found in the
 40 highest degree in the activity which is concerned with theoretical knowledge. Like a just man and any other virtuous man, a wise man requires the necessities of life; once these have been adequately provided, a just man still needs people toward whom and in company with whom to act justly, and the same is true of a self-

1 controlled man, a courageous man, and all the rest. But a wise man is able to study
 even by himself, and the wiser he is the more is he able to do it. Perhaps he could
 do it better if he had colleagues to work with him, but he still is the most self-
 sufficient of all. Again, study seems to be the only activity which is loved for its own
 5 sake. For while we derive a greater or a smaller advantage from practical pursuits
 beyond the action itself, from study we derive nothing beyond the activity of
 studying. Also, we regard happiness as depending on leisure; for our purpose in
 being busy is to have leisure, and we wage war in order to have peace. Now, the
 practical virtues are activated in political and military pursuits, but the actions
 10 involved in these pursuits seem to be unpleasurably. This is completely true of
 military pursuits, since no one chooses to wage war or foment war for the sake
 of war; he would have to be utterly bloodthirsty if he were to make enemies of his
 friends simply in order to have battle and slaughter. But the activity of the
 statesman, too, has no leisure. It attempts to gain advantages beyond political
 15 action, advantages such as political power, prestige, or at least happiness for the
 statesman himself and his fellow citizens, and that is something other than
 political activity: after all, the very fact that we investigate politics shows that it is
 not the same [as happiness]. Therefore, if we take as established (1) that political
 and military actions surpass all other actions that conform with virtue in nobility
 20 and grandeur; (2) that they are unpleasurably, aim at an end, and are not chosen for
 their own sake; (3) that the activity of our intelligence, inasmuch as it is an activity
 concerned with theoretical knowledge, is thought to be of greater value than the
 others, aims at no end beyond itself, and has a pleasure proper to itself—and
 pleasure increases activity; and (4) that the qualities of this activity evidently are
 25 self-sufficiency, leisure, as much freedom from fatigue as a human being can have,
 and whatever else falls to the lot of a supremely happy man; it follows that the
 activity of our intelligence constitutes the complete happiness of man, provided
 that it encompasses a complete span of life; for nothing connected with happiness
 must be incomplete.

30 MOREOVER, . . . what is by nature proper to each thing will be at once the best
 and the most pleasant for it. In other words, a life guided by intelligence is the best
 and most pleasant for man, inasmuch as intelligence, above all else, is man.
 Consequently, this kind of life is the happiest.