Nicomachean Ethics Study Guide

Nicomachean Ethics by Aristotle

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics begins with a simple premise, which is that everyone wants to be happy. The best way to become happy takes up much of the rest of the work, as Aristotle examines the nature of happiness what sort of actions lead to it. He is not solely interested in happiness for the individual, but also for the community. Aristotle concludes that to be truly happy one must live a virtuous life, and he discusses several specific virtues and how they are best realized. At the root of all virtue, he claims, is the decision to be virtuous. This decision is based on understanding and reason. Study, he concludes, is the most important activity, then, for it leads to understanding and ultimately to the greatest form of happiness. Aristotle concludes his work with a proposal to examine how political systems affect the virtue of their citizens in order to construct a system that would best serve its members by encouraging and enforcing a life of study, virtue and happiness.

Aristotle begins his work with a discussion of happiness and suggests that it is the highest good that all people strive toward. To be truly happy, he claims, one must be in a state of complete virtue. Doing virtuous actions is not enough. They must be done in the proper state of mind and for the proper reasons. He also determines that acting virtuously is voluntary, that people are responsible themselves for their character and their actions.

Aristotle examines several specific virtues such as bravery, generosity, temperance and truthfulness. Each of these character traits exist in a spectrum, with conditions at either extremes corresponding to the excess or deficiency of the trait. The excess of bravery, for example, is rashness. The deficiency of bravery is cowardice. The goal of the virtuous person should be to maintain an intermediate position between the extremes. He calls this position the "mean."

These means are not the same for each person, but are relative to the character of each person. Each person must possess the prudence to know which direction he must move in order to get closer to the mean. He must also use correct reason to inform his decisions, and aim in all things toward the goal of complete virtue, not simply for short term goals. Correct reason ultimately comes from understanding, and for this reason, Aristotle concludes that a life of study is the route to the greatest happiness. He completes his work with a return to the subject of happiness, which he has shown is brought about by a complete virtuous life guided by reason and understanding.

Book I

Book I Summary and Analysis

Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics begins with a simple premise, which is that everyone wants to be happy. The best way to become happy takes up much of the rest of the work, as Aristotle examines the nature of happiness what sort of actions lead to it. He is not solely interested in happiness for the individual, but also for the community. Aristotle concludes that to be truly happy one must live a virtuous life, and he discusses several specific virtues and how they are best realized. At the root of all virtue, he claims, is the decision to be virtuous. This decision is based on understanding and reason. Study, he concludes, is the most important activity, then, for it leads to understanding and ultimately to the greatest form of happiness. Aristotle concludes his work with a proposal to examine how political systems affect the virtue of their citizens in order to construct a system that would best serve its members by encouraging and enforcing a life of study, virtue and happiness.

Aristotle begins with a discussion of ends and goods. Every craft aims at a certain end, and every decision a person makes is directed toward a desired outcome. These ultimate outcomes, or ends, are goods in the sense of being good things. Each good is specific to the craft that leads toward it, leading to many different goods. For the bridle-maker, for instance, the end is a bridle.

This bridle is used by a horseman, however, whose aim is horsemanship. Thus, Aristotle explains, some pursuits are superior to others. Many things, which people think of as desirable, are desirable because they lead to something else. A person might desire money, for instance. However, the reason they want money is to buy other things that are also desirable. Those desirable things may be desired for yet another reason. This chain would seem to go on forever, Aristotle suggests, unless there is something superior to all of these desires, which is desired for its own sake, and not because it leads to something else. There must be such a thing, Aristotle claims, otherwise all human pursuits would ultimately be empty. This ultimate thing he calls the "best good." (p. 1)

Having established that such a "best good" exists, Aristotle suggests that its nature be examined so that it might be pursued. The field of inquiry best suited to pursue the nature of this good is political science, he suggests, because it is the study of what is best for individuals and for groups of people. Aristotle warns against expecting exact answers from political science, because it deals with what is "usually" true and does not aim at determining universal truths. It is also a field that is best left to experienced people, not youth, he claims.

With this, Aristotle asks what this "best good" is, and rapidly concludes that both common and educated people would say that it is happiness. Each group has different ideas of happiness, however. The common people might think that honor or wealth are

equated with happiness, while among educated people, or "the wise" as Aristotle calls them, some once believed that there is some ultimate good that makes all these other goods worthwhile. Here, Aristotle is referring to Plato's idea of a Form of the good, which he will reject later in this book.

Aristotle dismisses the idea of trying to examine all these ideas of happiness, suggesting it would be better to only examine those which are know to be widely-held, or which seem to have some evidence supporting them. Which ideas these are exactly is a problematic question, because those asking must be in a position to recognize them. In other words, they must have been brought up with "fine habits" in order to properly examine questions of political science. People derive their ideas of happiness from the kinds of lives they live.

Aristotle returns to the question of happiness, and defines three types of lives that are most desirable. These are the lives of "gratification," "political activity," and "study." (p. 4) Common people usually pursue the life of gratification, of mere pleasure, Aristotle claims. This makes them not much higher than animals. Not only common people pursue only gratification, however, he adds. Some well-known people in power are legendary in their pursuits of pleasure.

More cultivated people pursue politically active lives in order to receive honor from others. This ideal of happiness is incomplete, Aristotle suggests, because it relies on other people bestowing honor more than the actions of the individual. In addition, what these people wish to be honored for is their virtue, which means that virtue is, or should be, their actual aim.

Aristotle puts off the discussion of the life of study until later in the book. He remarks one common pursuit he has not included among the three, that of moneymaking. Since the desire for money is ultimately because of the other things it can purchase, he dismisses it from the types of lives that might be aimed at happiness.

Aristotle returns to the question of the Platonic idea of one superior Form of good. He repeats his contention that there are many different kinds of good, some that seem to be desirable for themselves, and some that lead to other goods. All of these goods have something in common, he admits, because they are not all simply called the same thing by mere chance, but whether this is out of analogy to some common ideal of good or not is beyond the scope of what he wishes to examine. If there is a Form of good, as Plato put forth, it is not something that can be reached practically by a person and so is not important to the pursuit of political science.

Aristotle reiterates the question of whether happiness is the "best good." He offers further support for this idea by pointing out that happiness is not desired because it leads to other things, but that other pursuits, such as gratification and honor, are sought because they lead to happiness. It is also "self-sufficient" in that it is not included as one of many similar things. There are many different kinds of goods, for instance, but just one kind of happiness.

Aristotle proposes going further into this assertion by asking whether humans have a function, as a carpenter has a function of building things for instance and a harpist has a function of playing the harp well. The most basic function of a human would seem to be simply to live and grow, but this function is shared with plants and animals also, so it cannot be distinctly human. Reason is what distinguishes people from plants and animals, and so to reason well must be the function of humans, he concludes. This function cannot be fulfilled in a short time, he adds, but must be judged over a lifetime.

Aristotle steps back and asks if his description of the good fits with the common views. It is important to make this evaluation, he says, because these views are relevant to the pursuit of political science. He concludes that his description fits with common ideas about the different kinds of goods. It also accounts for the different ideas of happiness and shows them to be at least partly correct. He goes on to present an idea he will develop more completely at the end of the work, which is that happiness requires things outside itself to exist, such as a certain level of prosperity.

Aristotle asks how it is that happiness can be achieved, whether it is by cultivation of some kind, or if it a matter of chance. He concludes that happiness reached through cultivation is better than that obtained by mere fortune, and for that reason it must the best kind of happiness. Furthermore, if it is a matter of cultivation then it is available to every person to be happy.

Aristotle returns to the discussion of whether a person can be called truly happy before he has lived his entire life. He refers to a saying by Solon, which says that no man can be called happy until he is dead. What Solon means by this, Aristotle says, is that a man's life cannot be judged a happy one until he has lived it entirely. This is perhaps true under on conception of happiness, Aristotle admits, but not necessarily if one connects happiness with virtue. If a man lives a virtuous life, then external misfortunes do not destroy his happiness. This means that happiness can be stable in a person's life, even when his life's circumstances are unstable, and therefore it is possible to call a man "happy" while he is still alive.

The place of virtue in relation to happiness is examined next by Aristotle. He suggests that virtue is inferior to happiness because it is something that is praised in others. Aristotle means, for instance, that a man might be congratulated and praised for being virtuous, but he is not celebrated for being happy. This Aristotle takes as evidence that happiness is more complete and perfect than virtue, and therefore superior to it.

Nevertheless, Aristotle continues, since happiness comes from living according to virtue, it is important to examine virtue in order to perhaps know more about happiness. To talk about virtue, he says, one must talk about the soul.

The soul seems to have two parts, a rational and a non-rational part. The non-rational part that controls the basic life functions goes on without our awareness, so it is not important to the discussion. Another part of the non-rational part is where simple desires reside. This non-rational part can come into conflict with the rational part. It is the rational part of the soul where the most important functions related to virtue are found.

Each part of the soul has different kinds of virtue, and the balance between the rational and non-rational parts of the soul is important for living according to virtue.

Book II

Book II Summary and Analysis

Aristotle takes up the subject of the nature of virtue. There are two types of virtue as he defines it, virtue of thought and virtue of character. (p. 18) These correspond to their origins. Virtue of thought comes about through teaching, while virtue of character is brought out through habit. This virtue of character is a capacity that all people are born with, Aristotle writes, and by exercising this capacity for virtue like a harpist practices a performance, a person develops a virtuous character. For this reason, he suggests, it is vitally important that virtuous behavior be practiced from the youngest age.

Aristotle looks at the type of habituation that should be desired. Here again he warns against looking for too precise a definition, as it is impossible and indeed not required to make specific definitions. He draws an analogy between virtue and the states of health and strength in a body. Each individual will have different requirements to maintain his health and strength, so trying to define a universal prescription is pointless.

Keeping with this analogy, Aristotle points out that in maintaining health and strength, it is not good to do too much or too little. Excess, such as eating a lot, will destroy health, as will eating too little. This is true of other human traits such as bravery and pleasure seeking. In all things, including virtue of character it is implied, Aristotle says there is an average between the two extremes that is the right balance. He calls this the "mean," and it is one of the central ideas of the work. (p. 20) Training the habits toward this mean is the best way to ensure the best results.

Driving us toward this mean, Aristotle continues, are pleasure and pain. Each has its role in creating a balance in the virtuous character, and indeed the nature of both virtue and of vice can be discussed in terms of pleasure and pain and how they are appropriate in various circumstances. Using pleasure and pain properly, Aristotle suggests, increases virtue. Using them wrongly ruins it.

Aristotle addresses what he perceives may be an objection to his argument that performing virtuous actions will reinforce a virtuous character. It is possible, for instance, to do something that is virtuous but to do it accidentally or with the wrong intent. Aristotle agrees with this rhetorical objection, and adds that the virtuous action is not judged alone. The person performing the action must also be in the "right state" when he performs them. He must know that he is doing something virtuous, he must do the virtuous act intentionally, and his state must be "firm and unchanging." (p. 22) Otherwise, the actions themselves may be described as being consistent with something a virtuous person would do, but not have the desired effect on the habits of the person performing them. Aristotle closes this section of his argument by adding that many people examine the nature of these actions and think that this alone is enough to make them better people. They do not put their philosophy into practice, however, and

so their pursuits are ultimately futile. Here Aristotle reinforces that he is after practical guidance in examining the nature of virtue, not simply out to describe it.

Aristotle defines three "conditions" of the soul, which he calls feelings, capacities, and states. (p. 23) Feelings are things like emotions and instincts, such as love and hunger. Capacities are the potential for having these feelings, how capable a person to show pity or anger, for instance. States are the general conditions of an individual's feelings. He may be too quick to anger or too slow, for example, or in some intermediate state.

Virtues and vices, Aristotle argues, are not feelings. His reasoning is that people are judged based on the virtues or vices they have, not on their feelings. One might be judged badly for the vice of overeating, for instance, but one is not judged badly simply for being hungry. In addition, Aristotle has already shown that true virtues and vices require a conscious decision, and feelings do not. The same is true of capacities, he continues. In addition, capacities arise naturally, and he has already shown that goodness and badness are not inborn natural traits. Since virtues are not feelings and are not capacities, they must be states, Aristotle concludes by elimination.

Aristotle goes on to examine what kind of state virtue of character is, and here he returns to the idea of the mean that he alluded to earlier in the section. Every virtue, he argues, causes the thing that possesses it to perform its function well. (p. 23) These qualities of virtue must be present in the proper balance, however, or else they have the opposite effect. For all things, there is an intermediate level, or mean, that is best. This mean is not universal, but is specific to each person. Aristotle uses the example of food. The proper amount of food for an accomplished athlete to eat is perhaps not the same for a young beginner, for instance.

To summarize Aristotle's argument, virtue is a state, then, that aims at the mean of proper action that is appropriate for each individual. These actions are determined by reason, which should be made best able to judge the proper action through habituation.

Aristotle next turns to the specific virtues of character. He defines several means, naming their deficiencies and excesses. The mean of fear is bravery, its excess is called cowardice and its deficiency called rashness. For the mean of friendliness, the excessively friendly person is perhaps a flatterer while the person deficient in friendliness is "ill-tempered." Aristotle again seeks to use actual examples to demonstrate that his philosophical theory corresponds to familiar aspects of the real world. He offers many examples, indicating that special attention must be given to the mean of justice and reason, which he will take up later in the work. These three states, deficiency, excess and the mean, are opposed to one another. Two are vices and one a virtue, as Aristotle describes them. Furthermore, their definitions are relative to the person judging them. A rash person might consider a brave person a coward, for example, while a coward might call a brave person rash.

To achieve the mean, Aristotle suggests, each person must plot his own course. He must become aware of his own natural tendencies toward one extreme or the other and

steer toward the opposite extreme. This is difficult, he admits, but repeats that the goal is not to trace a perfectly straight line, but to approach it as an average state.

In this section, Aristotle lays out the course he himself will take over the next several sections where he continues his discussion of the nature of virtue of character. He will also return to the list of characteristics, which he enumerated in this section, and further discuss the mean state for each of them, adding sections on justice and reason.

Book III

Book III Summary and Analysis

Aristotle opens the next section with an examination of what makes an action voluntary. He proposes that any action that takes place in ignorance or out of force is involuntary.

He raises examples of actions that are performed under threat, such as if someone threatens to harm a family member unless you do something "shameful" at their direction. Another example is when sailors throw cargo overboard in a storm to save the ship from capsizing. These examples complicate the question of what makes an action voluntary, for they include both an element of force from outside but they also include a voluntary decision to perform a certain act. In other words, the sailor's wisest choice to save his own life in a storm is to throw the cargo overboard but he still has to make a conscious decision to do so. These are "mixed" sorts of actions, Aristotle explains, and cannot be considered completely involuntary. For an action to be considered "forced," he concludes, it must originate outside the person performing the action, and the person must not contribute toward the action.

Aristotle next discusses actions that are performed in ignorance. A person cannot be blamed for actions that he performs out of ignorance, but his reaction to his own actions indicates the state of his character, he argues. A person who performs a wrong act out of ignorance but feels no regret for it cannot be said to have done it either willingly or unwillingly. This is because Aristotle defines "unwilling" as something that one does that causes some kind of pain to oneself. The person who does something out of ignorance is obviously not acting willingly, because he does not know what he is doing. Moreover, because he feels no pain from his action in the form of regret, he is not acting unwillingly either. Aristotle chooses to make a distinction for this kind of ignorant action by calling it non-willing. By following this logic, Aristotle concludes that the element of regret is necessary to call an ignorant action involuntary.

Having shown what makes an involuntary action, Aristotle now concludes that what is voluntary must be the opposite. In other words, the voluntary action must take place with the knowledge of the performer and be originated by the performer himself. He next addresses the aspect of decision and its role in character.

Decision is something unique to humans, Aristotle proposes. Animals and young children can be said to make voluntary actions, but not to engage in decisions about actions. He discerns it from simple wishes, which might be for something impossible or out of our own control. Decisions are made based on what a person thinks he himself might possibly make happen. Neither is decision a belief, he adds, for beliefs are either true or false and decisions are not described in this way. Decisions are judges as being good or bad.

Aristotle suggests that decisions are perhaps things that have been deliberated using reason. Not everything is open to deliberation, he adds. Some things are eternal or plainly demonstrated, like the existence of the universe and relationships in geometry. Only things that can possibly be one way or another and that a person can have direct control over can be deliberated, Aristotle proposes. Furthermore, what are deliberated over are not the final ends, but what will produce those ends. A doctor does not deliberate over whether he will heal a patient, for example, but he might deliberate over what actions to take toward that end. It is a kind of inquiry, he adds, but not all inquiries are deliberations, such as in math, where one inquires in order to find the one true answer.

These ends toward which we deliberate our actions are wishes, Aristotle explains. He addresses the belief that some hold that all people wish for the good. This cannot be entirely right, however, he claims, since not everyone can know what is good and might wish for something that is not good. This would create a contradiction where someone wishes for something that is not wished for. Others claim, then, that people wish for what is apparently good. Following this line of thinking results in the conclusion that there is no universal function to wishing because each person will wish for something different relative to his own circumstances, and these wishes will often contradict the wishes of others.

Aristotle combines these two beliefs about wishes and proposes that all people wish for the good, and that what is apparently good to each person is based on state of his character. People of good character wish for good things, people of low character wish for bad things, although they think them good.

Aristotle now takes up if and how a person is responsible for his own character. He argues that, as we are able to deliberate and take voluntary actions that accord with either virtue or vice, that being virtuous or "vicious," in the sense of being full of vice, is up to us. He raises a rhetorical objection to this assertion and asks if it is not true that since our wishes are based on our character, and our actions are chosen based on these wishes, that our virtue or vice is controlled by our character and so we cannot be held responsible. To this, Aristotle partly agrees. It is true that our character determines our wishes and thus our actions, but we are each ultimately responsible for our character, at least partly. He uses the example of a drunken person who does something wrong while drunk. He is responsible both for the action he commits and for becoming drunk.

Aristotle now concludes his general discussion of the virtues with a summation. Virtues are means between two extremes, and they are states of being. They are produced by actions, which are voluntary. He is now prepared to return to the virtues spelled out in Book II for further examination.

The first virtue Aristotle discusses is bravery. Earlier, he suggested that bravery is the mean between overconfidence or rashness and cowardice. He now adds that these extremes must be of a certain type to affect what we call bravery. A brave person is fearless, perhaps, but his fearlessness must exist under certain circumstances to be

considered bravery. These circumstances, Aristotle explains, are when a person faces death in honorable conditions, such as at war.

Aristotle continues that the truly brave person fears the proper things and in the proper amounts. A person with too little fear who is overconfident in the face of frightening things is rash. A person with too much fear and fear of the wrong things is a coward. Bravery is an intermediate state between the two, but it must come about from the proper motives in order to be true bravery.

Aristotle now spells out some of the motives that are improper to true bravery, even though the associated actions are usually called brave. He mentions the bravery of politically active citizens. This is not truly bravery, because it comes from the desire for honor or to avoid punishment from the state. Likewise, the bravery of soldiers who are compelled to fight under threat of death by their commanders is not true bravery, for their firm stand arises from fear of something worse, and not from a desire to be brave. So-called bravery may also be associated with those who have experience in a certain area, such as military matters or science. This kind of bravery stems from overconfidence, however, Aristotle states, and is not true bravery. Neither is mere spirit, as when a wounded animal turns to attack. This is only impulse, however, and Aristotle does not count it as true bravery. Hopeful people are not truly brave although they are called so, he continues. They are usually simply overconfident. The same is true of ignorant people, who may appear to act bravely, but because they are not motivated by a desire for bravery itself, they do not truly act bravely.

Thus, Aristotle again uses real world examples to support his assertion of what bravery is not. He returns to the definition of bravery. It is somewhere between confidence and fear, but associated more toward fear. He digresses slightly and adds that bravery is unusual in that it requires the presence of pain in order to achieve its end. Brave soldiers can expect to be wounded, and so their actions in one way are unwilling, yet their firmness of character drives them toward the end of bravery.

Aristotle now turns to the virtue of temperance. Temperance is a mean "concerned with pleasures," Aristotle writes (p. 45) and proceeds to enumerate the kinds of pleasures that exist. There are pleasures of the soul, he claims, such as the love of learning and honor, and pleasures of the body. Pleasures of the soul seem to have no excessive state that is called intemperance, Aristotle notes, and concludes that temperance is thus primarily concerned with pleasures of the body.

Pleasures arise through the senses, Aristotle proposes, but not all sensual pleasures lead to intemperance. Nobody is called intemperate for using sight to enjoy beautiful works of art, for example, or using hearing to enjoy music. Smell does not lead to intemperance except as it is related to taste. Taste, along with touch, is the senses that are associated with intemperance, Aristotle claims, and of the two, touch is primarily associated with intemperance. Aristotle extends the sense of touch to include the physical gratification one receives from eating and drinking.

There is a natural inclination to eat and drink, of course, Aristotle explains, but those who indulge in more than is necessary are called gluttons. They are intemperate, and feel pain when they cannot get all that they want. Temperate people do not find pleasure in the excessive satisfaction of their appetites, nor do they experience pain when they cannot get more than enough.

Even more than cowardice, Aristotle suggests, intemperance is a voluntary state because it involves making choices about pleasures. These choices arise completely internally and are not related to outside forces like cowardice is, he explains. It is easy to fall into intemperance because of its relation to pleasure, Aristotle writes, and it is reason that must prevail in order to remain temperate.

Book IV

Book IV Summary and Analysis

Aristotle continues to describe the specific virtues of character, their scope, and their excesses and deficiencies. He next turns to the virtue of generosity, which is related to money and valuable things. The excess of generosity is wastefulness, Aristotle explains, and its deficiency he calls ungenerosity.

The truly generous person gives to the "right people at the right time and in the proper amounts, and does so with pleasure." Generosity also has a component of taking, and the generous person does not take from the wrong kind of wealth. He acquires his wealth from the proper sources, and only so that he might then give it again. Aristotle is careful to add that the raw amount that a person gives does not make him generous. It is to be measured in relation to how much he is able to give. "Hence one who gives less than another may still be more generous, if he has less to give." (p. 51)

Wasteful people take too much and give out too much and to the wrong purposes, Aristotle continues. Because they cannot expect to find an endless supply of money to spend, however, wasteful people have an easier time approaching the mean of generosity because they will eventually run out of money. Ungenerous people have a harder time becoming generous, especially those who hoard their wealth. They have the means to be generous with it, but are not. Humans are more likely to become ungenerous, Aristotle claims. It is a greater vice than wastefulness, as well as being more common.

Similar to the virtue of generosity is the virtue of magnificence. This also involves the spending of money, but in greater amounts. By magnificence, Aristotle means large public gifts such as paying for a temple or a warship for a city. The excess of magnificence he calls vulgarity, and the deficiency he calls stinginess. Vulgar people go too far in these types of gifts and are driven by a need to display their own wealth rather then for the proper reasons. The results are gifts that are in poor taste and overblown. The stingy person will spend a significant amount on a public gift, but will hold back and try to spend as little as possible on it. Since the result is still a public gift, however, Aristotle claims that these vices are not as bad as others.

Aristotle turns next to a virtue he calls magnanimity. A magnanimous person is one who is capable of achieving great things and is worthy of those achievements. The excess of this virtue comes when a person thinks he is more worthy than he actually is, making him vain. The deficiency of this virtue was when a person thinks he is less worthy than he actually is, making him timid. Like generosity, magnanimity is relative to the ability of each person. The same claim might be a vain one if it is made by someone unworthy of it, but a magnanimous one if made by a worthy person. Magnanimity is "a sort of adornment of the virtues; for it makes them greater, and it does not arise without them," Aristotle writes. (p. 57)

The magnanimous person is concerned with honors, Aristotle writes, but only the proper honors. Proper honors are of the correct proportion and from the proper people. Small honors that are not worthy of his achievements do not please him, nor do honors from unworthy people, yet he is not overly pleased by the proper honors he does receive. He is also moderate in his appreciation of the riches and good fortune that often come with the virtue. He is right to consider himself superior to others, but he does not try to impress others with his superiority. Neither does he pretend that he is not superior, however. He is frank and truthful, and, Aristotle adds, usually moves slowly and speaks in a deep, calm voice. Vain and timid people, like vulgar and stingy people, cannot be blamed harshly for their conditions, Aristotle writes, for they are acting based on what they think they are worthy of, they are simply in error in their judgment of their own worth.

The next virtue Aristotle addresses concerns anger. This discussion presents a slight problem, he explains, or there are not common words to describe the mean, excess and deficiency of the virtue. He chooses to call the mean "mildness," which is closer to the deficiency of anger than the excess, which he calls irascibility. There is no name for the deficiency of anger, Aristotle claims, but describes the person who does not get angry when he rightly should as looking foolish. He seems to have no sensibility.

Irascible people are quick to anger, and get angry for the wrong reasons at the wrong people. There are many kinds of irascible people, Aristotle explains, for there are many different kinds of anger. This also makes it difficult to define a mean, he writes, because we often praise someone who does not get overly angry when it appears they have the right to. If a person is only a little to either side of the mean of mildness, he cannot be judged too badly, Aristotle claims.

Friendliness is the next virtue that Aristotle enumerates. Overly friendly people are fawning and always wishing to please. Those deficient in friendliness will always oppose others and are called "cantankerous." Overly friendly people who have a motive of gaining from their friendliness are called flatterers. Those who are overly friendly for no good reason are simply ingratiating. There is no name for the mean of friendliness, Aristotle writes, but its aim is to treat all people properly according to their stature and circumstances. Friendliness is similar to anger in that the extremes seem to abut one another with no easily defined mean. This implies that Aristotle may think that slight deviations toward one extreme or the other are not too bad.

The next virtue Aristotle describes he calls truthfulness, by which he means how a person acts and speaks about himself in particular. The excess of truthfulness is boasting, and the deficiency self-deprecation. The person who is properly between these two extremes is called straightforward.

A person may be boastful or self-deprecating in order to gain something or not, Aristotle explains. Whether they do either with an ulterior motive depends on their character. A person with the proper character will love truth and will express it in the proper way, even when there is nothing at stake.

There are different kinds of boastful people. Those who claim to have more than they do without having a reason are foolish and have a flawed character, Aristotle writes. Those who boast with an ulterior motive may do so to increase their reputation or to increase their wealth. Those who do it for money are worse than those who seek to better their reputation, he claims. Boastful people are all responsible for their state, he adds, since boastfulness arises from a person's character, and as Aristotle asserts earlier, each person is responsible for his character. Self-deprecating people are often thought of as sophisticated, Aristotle adds. Being overly self-deprecating in an intentional way can also be a form of boasting, he explains, as the Spartans do by wearing overly simple clothing.

Aristotle next turns to the virtue of wit, by which he means the action of amusing others. Some people will do or say anything for a laugh, he explains. These people are buffoons. Others never say anything funny and object when others do. These people are called "boorish and stiff." (p. 65) Those who are properly between these two extremes are called quick-witted or witty. Witty people will make jokes that are appropriate for the listeners and the circumstances. Aristotle admits that the standard of what is appropriate differs from group to group, and even changes over time. He points out that older plays display a different kind of wit than current ones.

Aristotle groups these three virtues concerning anger, friendliness and wit together as all being virtues concerned with how people interact with one another. He adds at the end of this section that he does not consider shame to be a virtue, although it may appear to be. Shame is more closely related to feelings, he claims, and since virtues are states, not feelings, same is not among the virtues. He also claims that continence is not a virtue, and promises to examine this in more detail later in the work.

Book V

Book V Summary and Analysis

Aristotle next turns to the topic of justice and what constitutes just or unjust actions. The state of justice in an individual is commonly thought of as the state where a person performs just acts and wishes for just things, Aristotle claims, and injustice is the opposite state. His discussion of justice will begin from these popular notions of the term. Here, as elsewhere, Aristotle uses already common beliefs to ground his philosophy in the practical world. He is very careful to ensure that his ethics does not violate any widely accepted notions lest it be rejected as impractical. He remarks that both justice and injustice are spoken of in many ways. An unfair person is sometimes called unjust, for example, as is a greedy person.

There are two types of justice, Aristotle claims, general justice and special justice. General justice is related to laws. Laws aim to provide for what is just in most circumstances, and deal with how one should properly act toward others according to the virtues. Furthermore, general justice is a complete virtue as it is the practice of not only what is proper in regards to oneself, but also toward others.

Special justice is the term Aristotle uses to refer to justice on a practical level, in particular justice as it is opposed by injustice and as it describes the actions of individuals. Aristotle once again raises the distinction between voluntary and involuntary actions regarding justice, which he will expand on later in the section.

Aristotle addresses the matter of fairness, first suggesting that what is fair is also just, and that what is unfair is unjust. Fairness is a kind of justice, and here Aristotle refers particularly to the distribution of things of worth. Using examples from geometry, Aristotle introduces the idea of proportion in fairness. What is fair is also proportionate and what is unfair is not proportionate.

This sense of proportion is carried over into another kind of justice that deals with transactions between people. Aristotle calls this "rectification," referring to the act of restoring proportion between two people. It is the role of a judge to restore proportion in the disputed transactions between two people. In the case where one person has taken more than he should from another, the judge's role is to properly restore what was taken to reach balance in the transaction.

Another type of justice applies to the value of things that are exchanged. This addresses the relative values of things that are exchanged for one another and the process of equalizing them through evaluation. For instance, a house is worth more than a shoe, but a large enough quantity of shoes would be equal to a house. Currency came about in order to facilitate this kind of evaluation and exchange, Aristotle writes.

Having demonstrated that justice and injustice are naturally concerned with proportion and balance, Aristotle turns to political justice. Before he begins, he suggests again that whether an action is voluntary or not is important to the question of justice. It is possible to perform an injustice without being unjust, he remarks. It is not the action itself that is unjust, he suggests, implying that motivation and knowledge play a role.

Political justice refers to how people within a community relate to one another justly or unjustly. Just relations between people are conducted in accordance with law, but Aristotle points out that the law and the judicial processes that uphold it exist because it is possible for injustice to occur. However, he repeats, just because something unjust occurs it does not always mean that an injustice exists.

Aristotle further divides political justice into natural and legal justice. Natural justice is universal and applies in all cases. Legal justice may vary from place to place and is based on law. Aristotle adds that natural justice may also be changeable, however. The main point of this section is to draw a distinction between what is unjust and what is an injustice. There are things that are "naturally" unjust without having actually occurred. It is when one of these things occurs that an injustice exists. Here again, Aristotle is drawing on abstract ideas and pulling them into the real world for applying them to real behavior. The same is true for the concept of a just thing and a just action.

Aristotle now returns to the notion of intent. An unjust thing only becomes an injustice when the person performing the unjust act does it willingly. If he performs an unjust act out of ignorance or by mere coincidence, it cannot mean that he himself is unjust, or even that an injustice has occurred. He cannot be blamed. Besides knowing what he is doing, a person must also know the person upon whom the unjust act is being perpetrated. It is a special crime in Aristotle's time to strike one's father, for instance. If a person strikes his father, but does not know the person is his father, then he cannot be blamed for his act. It might also be possible to do an unjust act with knowledge, but without consent, for example if someone takes your hand and forces you to strike someone else with it. This is also not injustice on the part of the person whose hand is actually striking the other person, because he is not doing it willingly.

Aristotle also introduces the kind of intent a person has in performing a potentially unjust act. It may be that a person strikes another with one outcome in mind, but a different outcome is achieved. This is also not injustice as Aristotle defines it. He discusses the act of deliberation as it applies to injustice. An unjust act performed without prior planning may still be an injustice, he states, as of course is one that is done with the plan to harm. Part of the judicial role is to determine the amount of blame based partly on the kind of intent and the amount of forethought.

Wishing not to contradict what can be observed in real life, Aristotle turns to some conceivably inconsistent ideas that might arise from his definition of justice and injustice. The first "puzzle" is whether an unjust act is an injustice if the person on the receiving end of the act receives it willingly. He concludes that nobody would willingly be harmed, and that injustice involves harm. By this definition, then, nobody can voluntarily suffer injustice.

Aristotle raises another puzzle. What happens when someone gives to another more than is just? If a person gives most of his money to another keeps less for himself, does he do injustice? On the other hand, perhaps the recipient does an injustice by accepting more than is due to him. Aristotle answers the puzzle with another question, which is whether it is possible to do injustice to oneself.

To explore this question, Aristotle uses the example of suicide. It is against the law to kill oneself, and this law is based in virtue. Murder performed willingly is an injustice if it meets the criteria Aristotle sets out earlier, and self-murder would seem, then, to be an injustice if it is carried out intentionally, is planned, and is done willingly. However, in this case, it is not the person who receives the injustice, but his community. Aristotle adds that if it were possible to do injustice to oneself, then it would be possible to suffer injustice willingly. This is not possible, however, as he has already shown, so therefore he concludes a person cannot do injustice to himself.

Book VI

Book VI Summary and Analysis

Aristotle returns to a remark made in Book II about the state of the soul and the role of reason. He has already shown that it is best to strive toward the intermediate condition to be virtuous, and that one determines the intermediate condition by correct reason. He has not shown yet, he explains, how this correct reason comes about. In Book II, Aristotle enumerates the virtues of character, which he then proceeds to define further. He mentions at that time that there are virtues of thought as well, which he would address in the following section.

Aristotle first returns to his division of the soul between the part with reason and the nonrational part. He proposes a further division of the part with reason into two parts, one called the scientific part and one the "rationally calculating" part. (p. 86) The scientific part is concerned with finding the truth about things that can be known for certain. The rationally calculating part is concerned with inquiring into things that cannot be known for certain. Each of these parts will have its own intermediate, virtuous state, he claims.

To inquire into this mean, Aristotle proposes to first examine what the function of each of these parts. He defines three capacities of the soul that lead to action, sense perception, understanding, and desire. Since animals also have sense perception, he reasons, it cannot play an important role in finding the function of reason. He concludes that reason uses understanding combined with desire to reach decisions about action. This is important to his argument, because Aristotle is above all concerned with how we should act. These actions are not themselves the function of reason, however, for there is a goal beyond them that reason strives for, which is truth. Therefore, the virtue of reason is the intermediate state that will best lead toward truth.

Returning to the states of the soul, Aristotle defines five ways the soul "grasps the truth." (p. 87). These are craft, scientific knowledge, prudence, wisdom and understanding. He dismisses the states of belief and supposition, because these have the potential to be false. He proceeds to further describe each of the five states, beginning with scientific knowledge. Scientific knowledge is a special kind of knowledge because it can be taught. Because it can be taught, it must already be known. Scientific knowledge does not allow for deliberation or decision under Aristotle's definition. Scientific truths can be demonstrated.

Craft knowledge is the king of knowledge one has about producing something. Unlike scientific knowledge, craft knowledge deals with things that do not have one demonstrable truth. Craft knowledge deals with making a thing where no thing was before, and so is part of the rationally calculating part of the soul. It is concerned with production, and not merely action.

Prudence is the next type of knowledge that Aristotle addresses. Prudence is a kind of self-knowledge that leads to a person knowing what is best for himself. By extension, prudence also leads to knowing what is best for humans in general, and so has practical application in political science. Prudence is not part of scientific knowledge, for it is based partly on belief and supposition, although it must be based on correct beliefs and suppositions to truly be prudence.

Understanding is a special kind of knowledge that addresses the principles behind other types of knowledge. A person can have scientific knowledge of universal truths, which can be demonstrated. The principles behind these truths cannot be directly demonstrated, however. It requires understanding to know these principles. Understanding is concerned with first principles, as contrasted to prudence, which is concerned with results.

Wisdom is a complete kind of knowledge that combines the demonstrable truths of scientific knowledge with the understanding of the principles behind them. Another word for wisdom as Aristotle defines it is "expertise." It is different than prudence in that prudence deals with human concerns and things that can be deliberated over.

Aristotle now turns to the idea of deliberation and an investigation of what good deliberation is. It is different than inquiry, he says, although it is a kind of inquiry. By process of elimination, he determines that good deliberation is part of rationally calculating thought, because "in deliberating, either well or badly, we inquire for something and rationally calculate about it." (p. 94) What makes deliberation good is the result toward which it is directed. This is different than an immediate, short-term goal that is limited in its scope. Good deliberation must be aimed toward a higher goal, and that goal should be guided by prudence.

Aristotle adds another attribute related to thought, comprehension. Comprehension is related to prudence, but it is different. It has to do with learning and applying knowledge that is gained through learning. It is also related to scientific knowledge in that scientific knowledge can be comprehended and applied. Consideration is another attribute seemingly related to prudence and understanding. Aristotle again brings his theory into the real world and points out that we often describe the same person as showing consideration, prudence, comprehension and understanding. He concludes that they are all aimed toward the same thing, which he calls "particulars." (p. 95) By this, he means that they are concerned with the results of thought and the things that can be achieved by action. This is important to Aristotle's goal of creating a practical guide to ethics. He places prudence as the most crucial state of reason, and indeed places it at the center of the idea of complete virtue. One cannot be "truly good" unless one possesses prudence, and one cannot possess prudence without being a virtuous state. As prudence is one of the states that are concerned with action and the end results of action, Aristotle thus strongly links the ideas of virtue and goodness with the practical aspects of action toward results decided upon through correct reason. This is a central theme of the work.

Book VII

Book VII Summary and Analysis

Aristotle now looks at virtue from another angle by looking at the states of character that should be avoided. These are vice, incontinence and bestiality. The opposites of vice and incontinence are virtue and continence. Bestiality, as Aristotle defines it, is a state where a person behaves no better than a beast. It is possibly the lowest state of human existence, and its opposite is something that is even higher than virtue, perhaps what would be called "divine." He promises to address this in a later section and begins to discuss incontinence.

Incontinence, as meant by Aristotle, is a lack of self-control. To examine it, Aristotle takes up the same method he has used before. He first speaks about what is said about people who are incontinent. He next addresses some of the "puzzles" that exist about these commonly held notions as they relate to his own definitions, and then seeks to show that his theories both explain the correct action and do not contradict any currently held ideas, which he offers as proof of their applicability.

Incontinence is similar to intemperance, which Aristotle has already defined as being concerned with the pleasures of the body. It is different that intemperance, however, in that the intemperate person acts according to what he believes is the best thing to do but he is wrong in his assessment of what is best. The incontinent person has a correct knowledge of what is best, but does not do it. An intemperate person might eat to excess thinking that he needs more food than he actually does, for instance. An incontinent person knows how much he should eat, but still eats to excess.

Intemperance and incontinence would seem to be different in another way, Aristotle writes, in that the term incontinence seems to be applied in common usage as a general state of being, whereas intemperance is only applied to refer to the bodily pleasures. He goes on to show that incontinence is actually about the same pleasures as intemperance. The other kinds of incontinence that people refer to are "particular" types of incontinence, not a general type.

Having shown that incontinence and continence are concerned with the same appetites and desires as intemperance and temperance, Aristotle turns to a discussion of these appetites and desires. They have to do with the senses of touch and taste and the pleasures and pains associated with them. Continence is the ability to overcome the desire for pleasure, incontinence the tendency to let pleasures overwhelm oneself.

Aristotle returns to his definitions of intemperate and incontinent people. Intemperate people act out of a wrong supposition of what is the best thing to do. This is a defect in reason, and if ones reason is defective, then one cannot become virtuous. Incontinent people have good reason. They know what they should do, but choose not to do it. Because their reason knows that they should do differently, however, they retain the

ability to mend their ways and cure their incontinence. It is not enough to simply abide by reason to be called continent. The reasoning must be correct and true. Prudent people act on this correct reasoning, as Aristotle has shown, and so, he concludes, prudence and incontinence are incompatible and cannot be found within the same person.

Aristotle now turns to the subject of pleasure, and to the common objections to pleasure being good. He brings up three common but different beliefs about pleasure. The first is that no pleasure is good, the second that some pleasures are good, and the third that all pleasures are good, but that pleasure is not the highest good. Aristotle dismisses these beliefs. His argument is based in part on the fact that pain is always thought to be bad, and that pleasure is the opposite of pain. Since pleasure is the opposite of something bad, it must be good. It is not the pleasure itself that should be called bad or good, he implies, but the way in which a person seeks it and the reasons he seeks it. He leaves open the possibility that a kind of pleasure may be the highest good, although he does not say so explicitly. Aristotle then describes some of the ways in which people relate to pleasure before announcing the topic of the next section, friendship.

Book VIII

Book VIII Summary and Analysis

Aristotle begins a lengthy discussion of friendship that will take up the next two major sections of the work. He notes that friendship seems to be a naturally desirable thing among humans as well as among other animals of the same species. Bonds of friendship seem to be holding communities together and are linked closely with justice. While all seem to agree that friendship is a good thing, there are some points about it that people disagree on, he states. Some believe that people who are similar are likely to become friends. Others note that people who are too similar are often quarreling with one another. Some think that friendship is a higher force that also applies to other natural phenomena. Aristotle puts aside the questions of friendship as a natural force as it does not apply to human activity, which is his subject. He asks whether all people are capable of being friends. He mentions that some think there is only one kind of friendship and that it exists in greater or lesser degree. Aristotle suggests that this belief is incorrect.

Before further examining this question he has posed, Aristotle takes up the subject of what is lovable. He returns to his three "objects of choice" from Book II (p. 21). These are goodness, usefulness and pleasure. These are the three reasons humans have for loving an object or a person. Aristotle removes the love of objects from the discussion, since we do not call that friendship. Friendship is partly love of another person, and wishing what is good for that person, but it is not really friendship unless the love is returned. However, even people wishing well for each other are not called friends, Aristotle continues, unless they are aware of each other's feelings.

There are three kinds of friendship, Aristotle claims, each corresponding to one of the types of love. Those who love each other out of usefulness or pleasure do not love each other for the sake of the other person, but a separate thing that the person provides. These friendships easily dissipate, Aristotle says. If a person loves someone because they are useful to him, he will no longer love him if he no longer is useful. The same is true of those who love for pleasure. If a friend ceases to be pleasing, the friendship will disappear.

Only friendship based on loving goodness is "complete" friendship, Aristotle argues. It is between two people possessing similar virtues who wish well to each other for the sake of the other and not for some benefit they receive themselves. These kinds of friendships take time to develop, he notes, but they also last. They are not common. Aristotle still considers the other two types of friendships to be friendship but only by coincidence. Thus, he has addressed the point he partially dismissed in the opening part of the section that some believe there is only one kind of friendship, but that it varies in degrees. He seems to suggest that there is indeed only one kind of true friendship, but that it does not vary. What others call variations in the level of one kind of friendship, Aristotle calls different types of incomplete friendship.

Friendship is a state, Aristotle says, not only an action. Friendship is not dissolved only because friends are far apart and not actively engaged in friendliness toward one another. It is different from love, since love can also be directed toward non-human objects. It is a kind of equality between good people, Aristotle explains. Even the incomplete kinds of friendship are between equals, Aristotle adds, but the friendships do not last because they are incomplete. Because of this equality, a person who offers friendship is also doing what is good for himself, for he receives back what he gives.

It is possible for those who are not equal to have friendship, Aristotle explains, and indeed these are often good friendships, as those between parents and children and between rulers and the ruled. To maintain an equality, however, the amount of loving in these friendships is proportionate to the difference in equality between the two parties. A ruler must be loved more than he loves, Aristotle claims, for the friendship to have proper balance and be complete.

This notion of equality between friends addresses Aristotle's earlier question of whether similar people are most likely to become friends or not. He has already defined complete friendship as being between good people of similar virtue, so it is clear that he thinks similar people attract. The incomplete kinds of friendship are more likely to be between people who are different, he explains. A useful friendship between a rich person and poor person, for example, or a friendship based on erotic pleasure between two people where one loves the other more than he is loved. These friendships do not last, he reiterates.

Aristotle once again speaks to friendship and justice. They are similar in ways, and related to one another. This is shown by how we commonly judge the severity of an unjust action when it is considered in light of friendship. It is considered far worse to steal from a friend than from a stranger, for example. Friendship is tied closely to community, with different types of communities, such as soldiers, sailors and families, based on particular forms of friendship. All of these communities aim at some benefit for their members, Aristotle remarks, and all are part of the larger political community, which aims for the benefit of all.

Thus, Aristotle moves into a discussion of political systems and the role of friendship in them. He defines three primary types of political systems, each with its own variant, or "deviation." The first is kingship, the second aristocracy, and the third timocracy, or rule based on property. The deviation from kingship is tyranny. The deviation from aristocracy, or rule by the best, is oligarchy, or rule by the few. The deviation from timocracy is democracy. Both are similar in that they are rule by those considered equals. Aristotle notes that families seem to have these kinds of political arrangements as well.

In each of these systems, friendship exists in proportion to justice. In a kingship, a worthy king rules to benefit his subjects, which is a form of superior friendship. This is also the kind of friendship shown between a father and his children. In aristocracy, each person is given the task he is best suited for. This is similar to the friendship between a husband and wife, Aristotle claims, with each taking on the role in the family best suited

for them. The friendship between brothers is like the friendship between equals in a timocracy or democracy. There is little or no justice in the deviant forms of tyranny and oligarchy, Aristotle states, hence there is no friendship. Democracy, however, allows for the strongest friendships because everyone is equal and has much in common. Aristotle expands on the subject of friendship within families, noting that it is natural and good. Because friendship is so closely linked to justice, these familiar types of friendship provide a model for acting justly toward one another.

Aristotle takes up the matter of disputes that arise between friends where both are equals, or where their friendship has been equalized in some way. Disputes are most likely to arise in friendships based on usefulness, as these involve getting something of worth from the other person. Friendships based on pleasure to not result in disputes so often, but many times lead to accusations, he says, based on jealousy. Complete friendships between equals do not lead to disputes or accusations, however. In the matter of friendships between those who are not equal, these friendships usually dissolve because each person has an aim that is contradictory to the other. Aristotle will explore this further in the next section.

Book IX

Book IX Summary and Analysis

Aristotle continues his description of friendship, spelling out several attributes of friendship and examining the proper actions in relation to friendship. He first describes friendships where each person has a different type of friendship with the other. If, for instance, a person has a friendship based on pleasure with a lover, but the lover is basing the friendship on usefulness. These friendships cannot last. They are based on each person expecting something and not receiving it.

There are also conflicts that arise between a person and his friends in his other relations. Aristotle asks if a person, when presented with the possibility to do a good turn to someone, should choose his friend over someone else who is perhaps more deserving. He adds another puzzle asking whether, if we have the money to repay a debt, it is better to pay back our debt or give the money to someone who needs the money even more. Aristotle concludes that while it is good to pay what is owed or to do a good turn for a friend, it is even better to do good to one who is more deserving or in need.

Aristotle notes that people often change over the course of their lives, and that friendships may dissolve based on these changes. He asks if this is proper. Two people may be equal friends at one stage in their life, but one may become "vicious" or the other may begin to exceed his friend in virtue. Aristotle concludes that if a friend becomes so base that he cannot be saved, it is proper to dissolve the friendship. Likewise, if one friend becomes far more virtuous than the other, it is proper to dissolve the friendship. In this case, however, it is good to remember the friend and the friendship.

The next feature of friendship Aristotle addresses is self-love. He asks if there is such a thing as friendship with oneself, but puts the question aside. People who are good friends tend to be comfortable with themselves, he remarks, and do not mind being alone because they have a clear conscience. Base people are uncomfortable with themselves, however. They seek the company of others to distract themselves from their own regret for their actions. They cannot be good friends. Therefore, Aristotle reasons, people must have a level of "friendly attitude" toward themselves to be good friends.

Aristotle returns to the notion of goodwill. It is part of friendship, he states, but it is different in that it exists only in one direction, is not as strong a feeling as friendship, and can be shown toward strangers. Nevertheless, goodwill is a sign of a person who has virtue and is decent.

Concord is a feature of friendship as well, Aristotle writes, but only the proper sort. It is not enough that everyone wishes the same thing, for their wishes might be selfish and

thus contradict one another. Rather, concord results from good people wishing together for what is best for all. It is a political feature for this reason.

Aristotle addresses the relations between a benefactor and beneficiary. Benefactors seem to love the recipients of their giving more than the recipients love their benefactors, he notes. This is probably human nature, he concludes. The benefactor receives something for his gift in the form of honor, where the recipient gains only the gift, which is not as fine. The relation is like the one between a craftsman and his product, Aristotle remarks.

Returning to the idea of self-love, Aristotle takes up the question of whether one should love oneself more than others. He notes that people who seem always to put themselves before others are commonly criticized, while those who seem to put others first are praised. He then distinguishes these observations by agreeing that base people do overreach in putting themselves before others, but also points out that some who seem to put others first are actually seeking some advantage or themselves and are simply being ingratiating. Furthermore, those that seem to put others first but are not being ingratiating actually receive high honor for their actions, which is something that good people love. Thus, he concludes, putting others first is actually a form of self-love that is good.

Aristotle next asks if good people need friends at all. For several reasons, he argues that it is. For one thing, it is better to be good to one's friends than to strangers, so a good person needs friends to be good to. Good friends are something worthy in and of themselves, he adds, and since a truly good person will choose to pursue what is good, he will pursue friendship. It is not good to have too many friends, however, Aristotle adds. Emphasizing the link between friendship and family and community, Aristotle concludes that one should have no more friends than one can live with comfortably.

Aristotle concludes his lengthy section on friendship adding that it is good to have friends in both fortunate and misfortunate conditions and not that they are better to have in one condition or the other. He does add, however, that it is especially good for a friend to help another friend in misfortune without first being asked for help. Finally, Aristotle notes that friends often enjoy participating in the same activities together. This mutual activity has the effect of strengthening friendships.

Book X

Book X Summary and Analysis

In the final major section of the work, Aristotle first takes up the subject of pleasure. He notes that pleasure must play an important role in the virtuous life because pleasure and pain are what steers a person toward the virtuous mean. He notes that some believe that pleasure is the ultimate good while others say it is the most base of things. Still others say that pleasure is good, and that people are naturally drawn toward it, so they should pretend it is not good and steer toward pain, which will result in approaching the mean. Aristotle dismisses this last idea.

He first addresses the idea that pleasure is the ultimate good. Here he refers to the ideas of Eudoxus, a philosopher who states that pleasure must be the ultimate good because animals as well as humans seek it, and something that is sought by all must be good for all, and therefore the highest good. Aristotle disagrees with this. He states that pleasure in itself is not complete because it can be added to. In other words, living a pleasant life is made better by also being prudent. If something can be made more good, then it cannot be the most good. This is also Plato's argument, Aristotle states.

Aristotle concludes that pleasure is a good, but it is not the ultimate good. He addresses one of the possible objections to this conclusion. To those who would object that some pleasures seem to be associated with vice, he replies that the people who find those things pleasant are like people with disease in the eye who see things as white when they are not white. In other words, those things are not truly pleasant. Pleasures seem to come from different sources, he explains, which can determine whether they are worthy pleasures or not. It is desirable to have money, for instance, but not if one has to steal it from a friend.

Aristotle turns to the question of the nature of pleasure. It seems to be something whole, not relying on anything else to make it complete, he notes. It is not a process, like building, where it changes or becomes more complete over time. Instead, pleasure seems to be linked to activity, Aristotle claims. We engage in activities that are pleasant, but the pleasure is not in the activity itself, but is something that complements it and arises from the activity. Thus, since there are many kinds of activities, there are many kinds of pleasures, each associated with the activity that produces it. As there are good and bad activities performed by people of good and bad character, so there are good and bad pleasures, or, rather, as Aristotle has suggested before, those pleasures enjoyed by corrupted people are not truly pleasures at all.

Following pleasure, Aristotle returns to the opening subject of the work, happiness. He reiterates what has been concluded about happiness. First, it is not a state, but an activity. Second, it is the kind of activity that is worthy in and of itself, not the kind that is worthy because it leads to something else. Finally, it is more than mere amusement. It is found in the proper activities, which are decided upon by virtuous people.

So happiness is found "in the activities in accord with virtue," (p. 163) and so it should be found in its greatest form in accord with the greatest virtue. This greatest virtue, Aristotle has already concluded earlier in the work, is the activity of study. Study aims toward understanding, and it is through understanding that virtue can be decided upon. The person who cultivates understanding has the potential to be the happiest person because understanding is the "function" of human beings.

The activity of study is superior to the activities associated with the other virtues in that it does not require anything external. Generosity, for example, requires money to be practiced. Bravery relies on external circumstance where one has opportunity to display it. Study is self-sufficient, however. One needs only to be human. This is not to say that one does not need external things to be happy, Aristotle is quick to add, for humans cannot live without their basic needs being fulfilled. Yet they do not need anything in abundance in order to practice virtuous activities and lead the happiest possible lives.

Aristotle has now reached a natural conclusion to his argument. He has outlined what can be known about happiness, the various virtues, friendship and pleasure, all of which he has built upon toward his primary conclusion that the virtuous life is built on study and understanding and will lead to the greatest happiness. Throughout the work, however, he has maintained a connection to the practical world, and he now states outright that this study of virtue and what leads to happiness is not enough. There must be a way to practice these things in real life.

Aristotle is realistic in thinking that argument alone will not convince most people to change their ways of living to become more virtuous. Adults have already developed many habits that are in contradiction to virtuous living, and undoing these habits is difficult. Therefore, as he suggests in Book I, a person should ideally be brought up with the "fine habits" needed to obtain a virtuous life. This upbringing should not only teach them to love the right things and hate the wrong things, but make them receptive to understanding reason as adults.

Upbringing is not enough, however, for a person must carry these habits into adulthood. It is laws that govern adults, and so Aristotle calls for laws that do not aim to compel certain actions but to support the fine habits that lead to virtue. Laws have a unique influence, Aristotle argues, because they are extensions of the community's will. This makes them more powerful than the edict of a single person such as a father or a ruler.

A community that upholds these kinds of laws is an ideal situation, Aristotle implies, and does not yet exist. It is therefore best for each person to undertake the proper upbringing and cultivation of his children and friends. For this, they would do well to learn about "legislative science." This kind of individual education is perhaps even preferable than education designed for the community, Aristotle explains, for it can be individually tailored toward a person's natural character.

This field of legislative science is still largely unexplored, however, and Aristotle ends the work with a proposal to study it with a discussion of what is known about, an examination of political systems to determine the best and worst features of each. From

this foundation, he proposes, an understanding of how the best political system should be organized, including the kinds of laws that should be made to promote the best habits, and ultimately, the greatest happiness of its citizens.

Characters

The Virtuous Man

The virtuous man aims for moderation in all traits of his character, being careful not to have to much or too little. Aristotle calls this moderate state the "mean." The virtuous man is not expected to walk this fine line precisely, but will sometimes be on one side of it or the other. He should be able to recognize his course and correct it toward the center when necessary.

This mean is not the same for all men, however, and the virtuous man must have the ability to know the best course for himself. This ability Aristotle calls prudence. Prudence relies on reason and understanding, and for this reason, the virtuous man must have these traits.

The virtuous man must also have a good character, which will allow him to properly apply reason to determine the prudent path for his life. Character is developed from a young age, Aristotle recognizes, and so proper education must start early to develop it, however all people are responsible for their own character he claims. The virtuous man must decide to be virtuous, and must be driven by the proper reasons or he is not truly virtuous.

Above all, Aristotle suggests, the virtuous man will be happy, which is the goal of all humans. He will find happiness in the practice of virtue, and will find the greatest happiness in the virtue of thought and study, for these things inform his decisions and allow him to lead the virtuous life.

Plato

Plato is a former colleague of Aristotle's who formed an academy where Aristotle once taught. Plato is one of the most influential thinkers of Aristotle's time, and has addressed many of the metaphysical ideas that Aristotle takes up in his work. In many of these ideas, Aristotle agrees with Plato, but in some he departs significantly, as in his definition of good. Plato is well known for his idea that each thing we recognize in the world, such as goodness, has a metaphysical ideal, or "form," which can never be achieved or grasped, but to which what we can see can be compared. Aristotle specifically disputes this idea of "good" having such a form.

Throughout Aristotle's book, he refers to the practical aspects of his conclusions by addressing how they are demonstrated in the real world. He concludes the book by suggesting that the next step is to design a political system that will create the kind of conditions he has determines will lead to a virtuous, happy community of virtuous, happy citizens. This is also the goal of Plato's major work The Republic, and Aristotle's conclusion that men of reason devoted to study are the best situated to create this kind

of society is parallel to Plato's conclusion that the ideal republic would be led by a class of philosophers who apply reason to guide the society.

Children

Aristotle mentions children several times in the work, usually in conjunction with animals. In his view, children do not yet have reason, and so are not considered to be fully human in a way. Nevertheless, Aristotle realizes that proper education in good character must begin while a person is still a child.

Youth

Youth are older than children, but not yet full adults. Aristotle does not define when a child becomes a youth or when a youth becomes an adult, but he mentions that youth are guided by their feelings in all things.

Women

Women are assumed by Aristotle to have capacities different than men, and are expected to play the role in the family and society that best suits these capacities. Aristotle does not enumerate these capacities, but it seems probable that he holds a traditional view of women as wives, mothers and housekeepers.

The Gods

Aristotle seems to recognize some kind of divine beings who live separately from men, but he does not describe them as humans with super abilities. They are beyond human, and are complete beings who are entirely self-sufficient. As a result, they have no virtue or vice.

Socrates

Socrates was a Greek philosopher whose ideas are known mainly through the writings of Plato. Aristotle mentions Socrates and refers to his philosophy in the Nichomachean Ethics. He rejects the idea that he attributes to Socrates that virtue alone leads to happiness.

The Sophists

The sophists were philosophers who also addressed education of individuals in public life. Aristotle mentions them from time to time in his work, sometimes negatively. The

word also refers to people who offer false arguments that seem valid, but are not, and Aristotle uses it in this sense.

Protagoras

Protagoras was a leading sophist thinker who holds that appearance is reality. In other words, he believes that what is actually good is what appears to an individual to be good. Aristotle rejects this idea.

Eudoxus

Eudoxus was a philosopher who believed that all pleasure is good. Aristotle refutes this idea by concluding that pleasure comes in different forms, and that what corrupted people think is pleasant is actually not.

Pythagorus

Pythagorus was the founder of a school of thought that used mathematics and geometry to describe reality. Aristotle makes reference to the Pythagoreans in his work.

Speusippus

Speusippus was a philosopher who led Plato's academy after Plato's death. Speusippus also addressed the subject of pleasure, which Aristotle refers to.

Homer

Homer was an ancient Greek poet, author of the Iliad and the Odyssey. Homer's works are well-known to Aristotle and his audience, and he refers to them several times to illustrate his points.

Objects/Places

Virtues of Character

Aristotle names several specific virtues of character including bravery, friendliness, generosity, magnanimity, and magnificence. Each of these is a mean between to extremes, one an excess of the virtue and one a deficiency in it. They are all specific to a certain character trait, but are all alike in that they are the same kind of intermediate state.

Friendship

Friendship is an equal relationship between two virtuous people who wish well for the other for that other person's sake alone. Friendship can exist between unequal people, but it must be balanced by the amount of love passed between the two. A king and his subject can have friendship, but the king must receive more love than he gives for the friendship to be balanced. Some relationships that are called friendship are actually based on usefulness or pleasure, Aristotle says, and are not truly friendships. Unlike true friendship, these relationships do not last.

Justice

Justice is a kind of virtue, according to Aristotle. He defines two kinds of justice, one being general justice, which is the kind that is the concern of laws that govern all people in a community. This is too broad a definition to be considered an individual virtue, so he also defines a type of partial justice which applies in specific situations.

Prudence

Prudence is the ability of a person to recognize his own character traits and to determine and decide upon the course of action that is most appropriate. To be prudent, a person must also possess proper reason and understanding.

Pleasure

Pleasure is defined by Aristotle as a good, but not the ultimate good as some others claim. True pleasure is only found in virtuous things, Aristotle claims. What corrupted people might find pleasant is not truly pleasant, he states.

State

A state is a condition of being. It is not a process or an action, but is an ongoing condition. The virtues of character are states.

Temperance

Temperance in Aristotle's definition is moderation of the desires of the body, particularly those related to the senses of touch and taste. Intemperance is a lack of control of these appetites. The intemperate person does not realize what a proper, moderate level of fulfillment is, Aristotle claims.

Continence

Continence is like temperance, but it stems from a rational decision. Unlike an intemperate person, an incontinent person recognizes his appetites and knows where the point of moderation is, but chooses not to be guided by it. This makes it worse than intemperance in Aristotle's mind.

Political Science

In Aristotle's definition, political science is not a science in the strictest sense, but is the study of how a state can provide for the happiness of its citizens. Thus, the Nichomachean Ethics is a work of political science.

The Iliad

The Iliad is the poetic story of the Trojan War attributed to Homer. The Iliad would have been a well-known work to Aristotle's audience, and he makes reference to it to illustrate various points of his argument.

Themes

Happiness

Happiness is the thing that all humans strive toward, Aristotle proposes. In all decisions and in all things, the end goal is happiness. People may wish for other things, but these things are just a means to bring happiness. Happiness is something that is wanted for itself, not because it leads to something else, and so it is "complete."

In Book I, Aristotle bases his inquiry into ethics on the idea of happiness because it is complete in this way. It informs every decision that a rational being makes. Rationality is a distinctly human trait, so thus happiness is the proper thing on which to build an account of proper virtuous behavior. In fact, as Aristotle concludes in Book X, this rationality is what leads to the greatest happiness.

Happiness is not the same as pleasure, Aristotle claims. Pleasure is not complete, because something that is pleasing can still be improved if virtue is added to it. Anything that can be improved upon is incomplete. Simple pleasure is not guided by reason. Thus, Aristotle rejects the idea that a life devoted to pleasure will bring happiness.

However, neither will virtue alone bring happiness, Aristotle claims. External forces can invade upon the happiness of even a virtuous life and keep a person from being happy by affecting his ability to reason clearly. Nevertheless, the virtuous life based on reason is still the most likely path toward real, complete happiness. Reason and study are available to almost all people, and since they ultimately control one's happiness, they are central to Aristotle's concept of the essential function of humans.

Responsibility and Acting Voluntarily

It is not enough simply to do virtuous actions, Aristotle claims. They must be done in the correct state of mind and must be done with the correct intention. Each person, because he possesses an intellect capable of decision, must voluntarily decide to develop his character and aim his actions toward virtue. Virtue without this voluntary action is not truly virtue, and neither is vice. If we do something that appears virtuous but only because we fear some kind of punishment, we are not acting in true accordance with virtue, he claims. Also, if we are forced to perform some shameful act by another, or if someone takes hold of our hand and uses it to strike another, we are not to blame for our actions.

Blame and responsibility play an important role in Aristotle's development of the idea of virtue. Acting voluntarily is only part of the picture. Animals also act voluntarily, he notes, but they are not held responsible for their actions or assigned blame or praise. Humans differ in that they possess rational thought and so can be held responsible and blamed or praised for what they do. Aristotle extends this responsibility even to an individual's character. A person is responsible for developing his own character and reinforcing the

habits in himself that will support a life of virtue. A person will ideally have the proper upbringing to start developing these habits at an early age.

While each person is held responsible for his own actions and character in Aristotle's philosophy, he seems to hold the community partly responsible for the development of the proper habits and traits in its members. At the end of Book X, he suggests that political systems should aim at supporting the upbringing of citizens who are capable of making the proper voluntary steps required to choose a virtuous path. By implication, these habits and deals cannot be forced upon them unwillingly or else they will not be personally responsible for what they do since they are not acting voluntarily.

The Mean

Ethics to Aristotle are principles that should be used to guide the actions of individuals in their actions and states in the development of their laws and political structures. As such, they should be practical. It is not merely enough to think and talk about virtue, Aristotle suggests. It is crucial to inquire into how virtue can be put into practice in everyday life.

It is not practical to try to define one specific course of action that will apply to all people in all situations, Aristotle suggests. There are many different character traits, each different, as well as different kinds of people. His solution is defining virtues of character not as specific actions, but of states that exist between two extremes. He calls this intermediate state the "mean." The virtue of bravery, for example, is the mean between cowardice and rashness. The virtue of friendliness is the mean between being quarrelsome and being ingratiating or flattering. These means are not firm points between the extremes, but represent a kind of balance between them.

Thus, a person achieves these virtues by maintaining a balance between the extremes. Never are the scales perfectly balanced, Aristotle implies, but are always tipping one way or the other. A person should constantly adjust his path toward the balance point, but if he goes to one side or the other in the process, he is not to be blamed. This definition of virtue is practical in that it provides a goal for action and does not attempt to proscribe one course of action to all. Indeed, Aristotle claims that this mean is not in the same place for all people. Some might be more naturally afraid than others, and so must steer more toward bravery. Those who are naturally brave must avoid becoming rash by steering away from that extreme. The mean is determined by each individual using prudence, which is guided by reason and understanding.

The idea of the mean also serves to connect very different virtues of character in a unifying way. Although each virtue addresses a very different character trait, each is the same kind of intermediate state, regardless of the person or the virtue. This allows Aristotle to speak in broad terms about virtue while still maintaining the practical aspects of his ethics.

Style

Perspective

Aristotle writes from the perspective of a person addressing an interested and attentive audience. He assumes his audience has a certain level of familiarity with his subject matter and with the Greek writers to which he refers. He is a teacher, and he speaks both to teach and to persuade.

Aristotle is not only addressing his students, but his colleagues as well. Once a teacher alongside Plato, Aristotle departs from Plato's philosophy at times, particularly in his ideas about the nature of happiness. He also aims to distinguish himself from other philosophers and philosophical schools of thought that would have been familiar to his audience, such as the ideas of Pythagoras and the complicated but ultimately empty words of the sophists. Aristotle seeks to establish his own ideas as building on those of his predecessors, but being unique from them.

Aristotle is a professional thinker, so it is not surprising that he concludes in this work that a life of study and reason is what has the potential to lead to the greatest happiness. At the end of the work, he projects his ideas about virtue guided by reason into the political realm and proposes that thinkers such as himself and his audience are perhaps best qualified to design political systems that will create virtue and happiness among their citizens. His perspective, as a teacher and philosopher, is that even the largest questions such as the greatest happiness for all people can be addressed with reason and understanding.

Tone

Aristotle writes in an authoritative tone that is laced with lighter passages. Aristotle's style is often dense and repetitious. He frequently digresses from his point, returning to it several times and running over portions of his argument again. The work reads like a lecture, where the listener, unable to refer to the printed page, must be reminded from time to time of what has been asserted and what follows from those assertions. Indeed, this may have been Aristotle's original purpose in setting the Nicomachean Ethics down in writing, to serve as notes for a spoken argument. At times, the thoughts are presented quickly and in a condensed way, as if they are shorthand reminders of something Aristotle might have elaborated on while speaking. This sometimes presents an obstacle to the reader, who must fill in some of the interpretation that seems to have been left out.

Aristotle makes frequent reference to Greek literature and legendary historical figures throughout the Nicomachean Ethics, using these references to illustrate commonly held notions. This method of persuasion has been used throughout history, and is particularly

important to Aristotle's work because of the importance he places on commonly held beliefs and their relevance to political science.

Structure

Aristotle's original version of the Nicomachean Ethics was written continuously, without book or chapter divisions. Since very early, however, others have traditionally divided it into ten "books" with varying numbers of "chapters" within each book. These books and chapters generally correspond to natural divisions in Aristotle's argument. Translations and manuscripts have varied in the past, however, and sections are sometimes rearranged by editors in an attempt to make the argument flow more smoothly.

The first book is largely concerned with happiness and what is meant by this term. Book II discusses the different types of virtues of human character and how these virtues are acquired. Book III distinguishes between voluntary and involuntary actions and begins Aristotle's list of specific virtues of character, which continues through Book IV. In Books V and VI, he addresses two special virtues of justice and thought. In Book VII, he looks at virtue from another angle and discusses incontinence and how pleasure plays a role in virtue. Books VIII and IX are related to how virtue is put to use in human relations, particularly in friendship. Finally in Book X, Aristotle returns to the question of pleasure and then to where the book began, with another examination of happiness.

Quotes

"Every craft and every line of inquiry, and likewise every action and decision, seems to seek some good." p. 1

"Since happiness is a certain sort of activity of the soul in accord with complete virtue, we must examine virtue; for that will perhaps also be a way to study happiness better." p. 16

"To sum up: Virtue is about pleasures and pains; the actions that are its source also increase it, or i they are done badly, ruin it; and its activity is about the same actions as those that are its sources." p. 21

"Virtue, then, is a state that decides, consisting in a mean, the mean relative to us, which is defined by reference to reason, that is to say, to the reason by reference to which the prudent person would define it. It is a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency." p. 25

"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. hence virtue is also up to us, and so also, in the same way is vice." p. 37

"Actions and states, however, are not voluntary in the same way. For we are in control of actions from the beginning to the end, when we know the particulars. With states, however, we are in control of the beginning, but do not know any more than with sickness, what the cumulative effect of particular actions will be. Nonetheless, since it was up to us to exercise a capacity either this way or another way, states are voluntary." p. 40

"Often a pair of contrary states is recognized from the other contrary; and often the states are recognized from their subjects. For if, for instance, the good state is evident, the bad state becomes evident, too; an moreover the good state becomes evident from the things that have it, and the things from the state. For if, for instance, the good state is thickness of flesh, the bad state must be thinness of flesh, and the things that produces the good state must be what produces thickness of flesh." p. 67

"Some involuntary actions are to be pardoned, and some are not. For if someone's error is not only committed in ignorance, but also caused by ignorance, it is to be pardoned. But if, though committed in ignorance, it is caused not by ignorance but by some feeling that is neither natural nor human, it is not to be pardoned." p. 80

"For in all the states of character we have mentioned, as well as in the others, there is a target that the person who has reason focuses on and so tightens or relaxes; and there

is a definition of the means, which we say are between excess and deficiency because they accord with the correct reason." p. 86

"What we have said, then, makes it clear that we cannot be fully good without prudence, or prudent without virtue of character." p. 99

"The person who is prone to be overcome by pleasures is incontinent; the one who overcomes is continent; The one overcome by pains is soft; and the one who overcomes them is resistant." p. 109

"Moreover, in loving their friend they love what is good for themselves; for when a good person becomes a friend he becomes a good for his friend. Each of them loves what is good for himself, and repays in equal measure the wish and the pleasantness of his friend; for friendship is said to be equality. And this is true above all in the friendship of good people." p. 125

"It would seem to be clear, then, that pleasure is not the good, that not every pleasure is choiceworthy, and that some are choiceworthy in themselves, differing in species or in their sources from those that are not." p. 157

"For what is proper to each thing's nature is supremely best and most pleasant for it; and hence for a human being the life in accord with understanding will be supremely best and most pleasant, if understanding, more than anything else, is the human being. This life, then, will also be happiest." p. 165

Topics for Discussion

How does Aristotle's description of happiness differ at the beginning and ending of the book?

Discuss how Aristotle uses syllogism to draw conclusions.

How does Aristotle account for the pleasure that people seem to take in non-virtuous activities?

What role does intent and responsibility take in living a virtuous life, according to Aristotle?

How does Aristotle think individual virtue leads to a virtuous community?

Aristotle is careful to keep in mind the practicality of his arguments. Is his proposal on how to create a virtuous society a practical one?

Do Aristotle's notions about virtue apply to modern society? Why or why not?

Aristotle proposes to create a political system that would create virtuous, happy citizens. Based on the ideas in the book, what do you imagine would be some of the features of Aristotle's ideal system?

Are non-virtuous people really unhappy?