

CHAPTER ONE

The Audience of the *Ethics*, Book I

THE *ETHICS* IN CONTEXT

It seems reasonable to expect that a comprehensive study of ethics, whatever else it might leave in doubt, would offer a clear teaching on the best way to live as a human being. Yet it is precisely this issue that remains in question in what is arguably the most influential book on ethics ever written. Despite the privileged place that Aristotle's text occupies within the Western tradition, considerable controversy still surrounds the meaning of its central teaching on the best life. The problem is not that Aristotle fails to address this crucial question but that he appears to give two different and perhaps even mutually inconsistent answers.

Whereas the priority that Aristotle assigns to philosophic contemplation over moral virtue is obvious to all students of the *Ethics*, the precise nature of the relationship between them has fired a great deal of debate. Despite the obvious importance of this issue, scholars remain sharply divided. One of the deepest rifts lies between those who maintain that Aristotle argues for some combination of moral and intellectual excellence and those who maintain that his endorsement of contemplative excellence is separable from, and perhaps even incompatible with, his teaching on moral virtue. With varying degrees of difference, the former position is argued by Richard Bodéüs, Stephen Clark, W. F. R. Hardie, Richard Kraut, Carnes Lord, and Amélie Rorty. The latter problem is raised by J. L. Ackrill and Georges Rodier and is given its sharpest expression by John Cooper, Thomas Nagel, and Kathleen Wilkes.

At the very least, continuing controversy about the exact relationship between moral and intellectual virtue in the *Ethics* suggests a cer-

tain ambiguity in Aristotle's treatment. I wish to argue that this is a deliberate ambiguity shaped by specific *apologetic* concerns that, at least in part, are responsible for the extraordinary influence of Aristotle's political writings among those who do not primarily or essentially regard themselves as philosophers. Before making this argument, it will prove useful to outline the contours of the debate about Aristotle's teaching on the best life. This dispute both frames the central question of the *Ethics* and points to the need to consider with greater attentiveness the question of Aristotle's intended audience in this book.

PHILOSOPHIC READINGS OF THE *ETHICS*

At the risk of oversimplifying, it is possible to distinguish two major lines of interpretation concerning Aristotle's teaching on the best life in the *Ethics*. Whereas some detect the presence of two inconsistent views,¹ others argue that Aristotle offers one essentially consistent teaching.² Without attempting to exhaust all the nuances in this debate, it is possible to establish the main contours of the problem by summarizing the positions of J. L. Ackrill and John Cooper on the one hand, and of W. F. R. Hardie and Richard Kraut on the other.³

Akrill argues that Aristotle offers an "inclusive" teaching on happiness (*eudaimonia*) in Book I. The primary ingredients of happiness are those activities undertaken for their own sake. When Aristotle concludes that happiness is an activity in accord with the best or most complete virtue, Ackrill observes that nothing in the preceding argument requires or even suggests that we restrict this activity to the contemplative virtue of wisdom (*sophia*). He explains that Aristotle's reference to the best and most complete virtue in Book I points to an inclusive understanding of happiness in that happiness results from the activity of "total virtue," a composite that includes both moral and intellectual excellence.

The difficulty with the inclusive interpretation becomes apparent in the concluding book of the *Ethics* where Aristotle argues that it is not the practice of several moral virtues but the activity of intelligence (*nous*) that constitutes the best and most perfect virtue. Ackrill observes that although Aristotle ranks contemplation above the life of action, his argument in Book X does not assert that what makes an action virtuous is its tendency to promote contemplation. Such an argument would justify even the most "monstrous" activities provided only that they pro-

moted the philosophic life. The problem is that Aristotle offers no alternative explanation as to what makes morally virtuous actions virtuous. He appears to assume that this is self-evident by appealing to the settled character or reliable judgment of decent human beings. This kind of argument, however, offers no principled way of combining Aristotle's emphasis on the intrinsic value of moral virtue throughout the first half of the *Ethics* and the description of contemplation as an "incommensurably more valuable activity" in Book X. The root problem, as Ackrill sees it, is a fundamental lack of clarity in Aristotle's understanding of human nature. Aristotle's failure to present one consistent view of human nature means that his teaching on the best life for human beings is inevitably "broken-backed," that is, "incapable of clear specification even in principle."⁴

John Cooper detects this same tension in Aristotle's teaching on the best life and casts it into sharper relief. Supporting his interpretation with reference to Aristotle's "mature work" in *De Anima*, Cooper maintains that Aristotle adopts an "intellectualist ideal" in Book X, "one in which the highest intellectual powers are split off from the others and made, in some obscure way, to constitute a soul all their own." Aristotle's identification of happiness with contemplation in Book X is so complete that it excludes any concern for familial, social, or political life except insofar as they provide the conditions for a life of theoretical activity. Cooper concludes that Aristotle's considered view of human happiness in Book X does not build upon his analysis of moral virtue in the preceding books but is actually inconsistent with it.⁵

On the other side of this issue Hardie and, more recently, Kraut maintain that the *Ethics* contains a single consistent teaching on the best life.⁶ Hardie suggests that Aristotle's arguments in Book I are best compared to preliminary sketches made by an artist before he determinately creates the work of art. If Aristotle is "hesitating" between an "inclusive" and "exclusive" formulation of happiness in Book I, this is not the result of any intellectual confusion on his part but is entirely appropriate given the status of Book I as a "sketch" or "outline" (*perigraphē*). Whereas Ackrill sees an inconsistency in Aristotle's recommendation of wisdom as the dominant ingredient of happiness in Book X and his earlier inclusive recipe for happiness in Book I, Hardie reconciles these differences by emphasizing the tentative character of Book I.

With respect to Aristotle's elevation of the theoretical life in Book X, Hardie maintains that the priority given to the contemplative life is "not so absolute as to make comparison and compromise impossible."

Whereas Aristotle gives “paramount” place in the good life to contemplation, he also retains a place for family, friends, and the active life of the citizen. Aristotle’s assertion that the practice of moral virtue yields happiness in a secondary sense is taken by Hardie to confirm this view. He concludes that the *Ethics* teaches the wise to cultivate a variety of goods while giving highest priority to the most fully satisfying activity of theory or science.

Kraut also maintains that the *Ethics* is free of internal conflict, but in doing so he takes issue with both the “intellectualist” and “inclusivist” positions. On the one hand, he argues against the view that happiness consists of contemplative activity *simpliciter* and has, therefore, no intrinsic or necessary connection to the practice of moral virtue. On the other hand, he is critical of interpretations that assert that happiness is a composite of different goods, only one of which is contemplation. Kraut explains that Aristotle offers two good ways of answering the question about happiness. The best answer is that happiness consists in the virtuous activity of theoretical reason (*theōria*). The second best answer is that happiness is to be found in virtuous practical activity, the exercise of virtues such as courage, moderation, and justice. The conflict between these two answers is only apparent. On the one hand, the philosophic life presupposes the development and practice of the ethical virtues, and, on the other, Aristotle “intellectualizes” practical virtues, regarding them as “approximations of the theoretical virtues.” In both cases the proper function of human beings is to use reason well. The common core that unites Aristotle’s twofold teaching is that human happiness lies *solely* in excellent reasoning activity. This provides the single standard by which the whole range of human actions is to be evaluated. All other goods are or should be desirable only as means to this end; they possess “no direct weight at all in determining how close a person is to happiness or misery.”⁷

Although the two main interpretations that emerge from this debate appear irreconcilable, I wish to argue that they point to a deliberate and ultimately consistent tension in Aristotle’s ethical teaching. To advance this thesis, it is necessary to bring to light and call into question a common premise shared by many Aristotelian scholars; namely, that the *Ethics* is best understood as a philosophic exposition in the very specific sense that it is intended to present philosophers with a systematic account of the best way of life, one that can and should be analyzed in light of current philosophic discussions on this subject. This points to a second and deeper rift in Aristotelian scholarship, one that arises

from the question of Aristotle's intended audience. The issue is not primarily a historical one about the original audience for Aristotle's lectures, but rather a pervasive presumption about the importance and consequences of that audience for understanding and evaluating the nature of Aristotle's study as a whole.

POLITICAL READINGS OF THE *ETHICS*

A second tradition of scholarly interpretation gives especial weight to the fact that the *Ethics* falls into a group of texts that constitute Aristotle's study of "the human things." These scholars, notwithstanding various interpretative differences, agree in questioning the assumption that every Aristotelian treatise attempts to push out the frontiers of theoretical knowledge. Whatever may be true about Aristotle's studies in physics, biology, or metaphysics, his study of "the human things" is emphatically practical in the sense that it seeks to contribute not only, or even primarily, to theoretical knowledge, but to benefit human life and action. Aristotle's ethical treatises should not be approached as part of a self-contained system, but as part of the more comprehensive and open-ended study of politics to which he assigns them (1.2.1094a26–94b11). As a consequence, an adequate interpretation requires attentiveness to both the rhetorical and pedagogical dimensions of the *Ethics*, a concern that presupposes careful consideration of Aristotle's intended audience.

In the United States, this approach to Aristotle's political writings was pioneered by Leo Strauss and applied to the *Ethics* by Harry Jaffa.⁸ Strauss argues that Aristotle founded political science as an independent discipline among other disciplines by clarifying the phenomena of politics from the perspective of the involved citizen, rather than that of the disinterested and scientific observer. From this point of view Aristotle presents moral virtues as they are experienced by those who most embody them; he makes no attempt to deduce virtue from some higher theoretical science, nor does he feel compelled to offer a justification for the widespread belief of decent persons in the intrinsic goodness of moral virtue.⁹

Working within this framework, Jaffa attempts to disentangle the *Ethics* from Aquinas's influential account of that treatise, an account that subsequently came to be all but identified with Aristotle's own view of the subject. Jaffa successfully recovers much of the subtlety and depth

of Aristotle's treatment by preserving rather than eliminating several of the ambiguities and apparent inconsistencies that characterize Aristotle's presentation of the moral horizon. Whereas Strauss maintains that Aristotle's treatment of politics is not, strictly speaking, written from a philosophic point of view, Jaffa succeeds in wresting the first part of Aristotle's study of politics from the encroachments of a fundamentally theological perspective. Strauss insists and Jaffa demonstrates the fruitfulness of reading the *Ethics* with an awareness of the citizen perspective within which it was conceived.¹⁰

More recently, Carnes Lord and Richard Bodéüs have, from different points of view, argued that Aristotle's political works are not intended primarily for philosophers. Lord, writing about the *Politics*, maintains that Aristotle's treatise is neither a strictly political nor strictly philosophic inquiry. The original form of political science articulated by Aristotle occupies a middle ground; it is a practical science that is shaped more by a concern for action than thought. As such it is addressed especially to those who are potential or actual legislators and aims at clarifying and amending their understanding of politics with a view to their greater effectiveness.¹¹

Bodéüs applies this view to Aristotle's study of both ethical and political matters, what he considers to be "the entirety of Aristotle's reflections on human things."¹² Bodéüs argues that most of the oral lectures compiled in the *Ethics* were not merely, or even primarily, intended for the full-fledged philosophers of the Lyceum. However, neither were they intended to persuade the as yet unvirtuous to acquire virtue. Although the *Ethics* contains an element of exhortation, it is essentially a collection of analyses aimed at intellectual clarification. Taking his bearings especially from the concluding chapter of the *Ethics*, Bodéüs maintains that the discourses preserved in this book, like those contained in the *Politics*, "are addressed to the person charged with defining the laws, that is, to the politician." Further, each treatise is incomplete without the other. As Aristotle argues in the concluding chapter of the *Ethics*, moral discourse is incapable of establishing virtuous practice among the many who have not already been habituated to virtue. On the other hand, the *Politics* does not provide the kind of moral instruction requisite for legislators who, because they are responsible for education, are, to that degree at least, architects of human happiness. Taking issue with the more pervasive view that the *Ethics* is addressed to those who wish to become virtuous and the *Politics* to those who aspire to political office, Bodéüs maintains that both are

intended for those who will preside over the fate of the city. When Aristotle turns to moral and political matters, he is no longer addressing a narrow audience constituted by students of philosophy, but a broader public comprised of those who are especially interested in the problems and issues of political life.

The approach to Aristotle's political writings that takes into account the citizen horizon within which they were conceived has yet to win anything like scholarly consensus. The continued distance between what I have termed philosophic and political readings of the *Ethics* is especially unfortunate given the compelling character of arguments on both sides of the divide. The book that follows is intended to help bridge this chasm by offering a reading of the *Ethics* that works out with greater specificity the implications and consequences of a political reading for our understanding of the treatise in the form in which it has come down to us. I am especially concerned to bring to light what might be called the architectural complexity of the *Ethics*. By this, I mean the structure of the argument as a whole and the pedagogically informed way in which Aristotle conceives and develops particular arguments so as to lead his audience to a greater appreciation for the complexities and tensions inherent in a morally serious life.¹³ This, in turn, presupposes attentiveness to the rhetorical design of the book as a whole.

ARISTOTLE'S DUAL AUDIENCE

Several times at the outset of his consideration Aristotle calls attention to the peculiar character of ethical inquiry (see esp. 1.3.1094b11–95a13 and 2.2.1103b26–04a11). In a striking formulation, Aristotle asserts that the aim of ethical study is not knowledge (*gnōsis*) but action (*praxis*) (1.3.1095a4–6). As he later explains, ethical inquiry, unlike other kinds of study, is not undertaken for the sake of theoretical knowledge (*theōria*) but “so that we might become good” (*hin'agathoi genōmetha*) (2.2.1103b26–30). These opening remarks in Books I and II are echoed in the final chapter of the *Ethics* where Aristotle reminds his readers that in a practical inquiry, the end is not theoretical knowledge but action. Knowing what virtue is, is insufficient because the goal is to possess and practice it, that is, “in some way to become good” (10.9.1179a33–79b4). Aristotle's remarks at the beginning and end of his book effectively frame his study with statements about the peculiar

character of this kind of inquiry. Unlike other branches of philosophic investigation, the *Ethics* is explicitly subordinated to a practical rather than theoretical end.

It is especially in light of this practical aim that Aristotle's remarks about the qualities presupposed in his students are fully intelligible. Ethical study is particularly problematic for the young because they lack experience and, hence, the matter about which and from which this study is drawn (1.3.1095a2–6). Moreover, insofar as the young are under the sway of emotion, they make bad students of ethics even if they are capable of understanding the various theoretical principles and definitions that Aristotle sets forth. Since the purpose of the *Ethics* is to help its readers live better lives, those who guide their actions by feelings (*pathos*) derive no real benefit from their merely theoretical knowledge.¹⁴

Aristotle further indicates that he will assume, as the basis for the discussion that follows, the common (*koinon*) belief that one should act according to right reason (*kata ton orthon logon prattein*) (2.2.1103b31–34). It is important to observe that such a belief is “common” only among those with a decent upbringing. Although Aristotle promises to speak about the exact meaning of this expression later, he makes it clear at the outset that his inquiry is addressed to those who already accept a certain, albeit unspecified, standard of decency (cf. 1.4.1095b2–8; 2.1.1103b23–25).¹⁵ The significance of this condition is best seen by way of contrast. Plato begins his famous dialogue on justice with a powerful assault on the goodness of this virtue. Not only is this attack made by the worldly and cynical Thrasymachus, but it is repeated and expanded by Glaucon and Adeimantus, two brothers who would like to believe that justice is good for the one who practices it but are afraid that such a belief may be naive wishful-thinking. It is precisely this challenge to the goodness of justice in the opening books of the *Republic* that provides the driving force for the imaginative defense that follows. Whereas Plato's dialogue explicitly draws in those readers who are troubled by the most fundamental precondition for a morally decent life—namely, belief in the goodness of moral virtue—there is no comparable beginning in the *Ethics*. Although, as I hope to make clear, Aristotle is acutely aware of this problem and will find a way to broach it later in his study, he begins from a very different starting point. Aristotle assumes that his readers already accept the “orthodox” standard of goodness provided by *orthos logos*. Even without specifying all that is included in such a standard, the comparison to Plato reveals the most essential point. The primary audience

of the *Ethics* consists of those who accept rather than question the goodness of virtue itself. It is especially for this audience that Aristotle's study clarifies and to some extent modifies a code of decency that he presupposes on the part of his readers.

Aristotle's preliminary remarks also include a warning to the effect that students of ethics should not expect mathematical precision in a subject dealing with human actions, the just, and the noble (1.3. 1094b19–27). If a certain kind of imprecision is appropriate given the subject of this study, philosophic precision would require that Aristotle challenge the guiding or at least starting premise provided by *orthos logos*. Indeed, the ascent from authoritative opinion to genuine knowledge describes the essential movement of the philosophic life. Nevertheless, Aristotle chooses to begin his study by reflecting and in some sense preserving the kind of noble imprecision characteristic of decent but not necessarily philosophic students.

These initial points might be summarized in the following way. The primary audience of the *Ethics* is characterized less by a desire for theoretical knowledge and more by an attraction to goodness. Hence, those who are beneficiaries of a decent upbringing, have some experience of life, and have attained a certain level of maturity, are in a position to derive the greatest benefit from Aristotle's book and, as such, are its primary, though not necessarily exclusive, addressees. Aristotle's book is not primarily addressed to "philosophers" but to the better sort of persons referred to in classical literature as "gentlemen." Although these two terms—philosopher and gentleman—are generally known, they are used here in a precise way that warrants further clarification.

In its primary and best sense, "gentleman" is a translation of *kalos k'agathos*, a Greek expression meaning "beautiful/noble and good."¹⁶ The term connotes both social-political status and a certain level of moral excellence (*EE* 8.3.1249a10–17). The *kalos k'agathos* is a citizen in the fullest and best sense of the word, one who embodies the highest aims of the polis. He acts with a view to the noble; that is, he both possesses and acts in accordance with those virtues that are generally regarded by decent human beings to be praiseworthy for their own sake (*EE* 8.3.1248b34–38; 1249a1–4). He is also bound to a certain social and political class because his way of life requires both economic well-being and the presence of others in order to practice those virtues that are constitutive of his character.¹⁷ In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle typically appeals to the "standard" (*kanōn*) or "measure" (*metron*) furnished by the "morally serious" (*ho spoudaios*) or "decent" (*ho epieikēs*) person

(consider, among numerous references, 3.4.1113a25–33; 9.9.1170a8–11; 10.5.1176a15–19; and 5.10.1137a34–b2).¹⁸ Although there is a clear overlap between the *spoudaios* and *epieikēs* on the one hand and the *kalos k'agathos* on the other, the latter term carries with it a somewhat narrower connotation in that it is more *directly* tied to a particular social class. As I hope to make clear, Aristotle's appeal to the more inclusive and somewhat ambiguous *spoudaios* and *epieikēs* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* points to the broader dual audience to which this study is directed.

There is, however, a shadow-side to this idealized description of the primary audience of the *Ethics*, one that is reflected in another Greek term used to describe the social-political class with which the *kalos k'agathos* is most closely associated. Aristotle periodically refers to "notables" (*gnōrimoi*). This group is distinguished from the general population by wealth, good birth, virtue, and education (*Pol.* 4.4.1291b28–30). Given the difficulty involved in recognizing genuine virtue, the more visible advantages of wealth, good birth, superior education, and political position provide less ambiguous and more pervasive criteria for distinguishing notables as a social class.¹⁹ Aristotle observes that the more fortuitous advantages of wealth and good birth are very often accompanied by hubris, arrogance or disdain (*Rh.* 2.15–16.1390b14–91a19), and that the *agonistic* love of honor characteristic of the powerful, often expresses itself in domination (*kratein*) (cf. *Rh.* 2.17.1391a20–29 and *Pol.* 7.2.1324b2–7).

As we shall have occasion to see, Aristotle's appeal to the standard provided by the decent or morally serious person should not be simply identified with the more visible and sociological *gnōrimoi*. Although it is true that the notion of the *kalos k'agathos* is drawn from this social group, it is also the case that many, perhaps most, of those properly described as notables fall short of the ideal of *kalokagathia*.²⁰ The distance between these terms and the different ways in which they are evaluated by Aristotle points to both the rhetorical and pedagogical dimension of his study as a whole. At this point it is sufficient to state what I hope to make clear through subsequent analysis. Aristotle's appeal to the best sensibilities of morally serious persons is not merely a reflection or codification of the current social practice of notables.²¹ Although Aristotle's investigation is unquestionably rooted in Greek society, by his own reckoning the value of his study depends upon the adequacy of his analysis of the more enduring aspects of human experience involving character, happiness, and the noble (*Pol.* 7.13.1332a7–25; cf. 3.4.1276b16–77b32).²²

The nominal definition of the philosopher is one who loves wisdom. In classical usage, philosophy also designates a way of life, one that aims at discovering or “beholding” (*theōria*) the truth. Unlike the *kalos k’agathos*, the philosopher is not bound to any particular social status, nor is his way of life defined in relation to moral excellence. Indeed, as the trial of Socrates revealed, the two ways of life are in serious conflict.²³ Whereas the life of decent persons is circumscribed by social, political, and moral conventions, the philosophic life is characterized by a radical questioning of all conventional beliefs and opinions, even praiseworthy ones, with a view to discovering the truth.

On the basis of these preliminary remarks it is possible to state with greater precision what I take to be a distinctive feature of Aristotle’s political writings in general and the *Ethics* in particular. Unlike Aristotle’s more explicitly philosophical works (e.g., *Metaphysics* or *Categories*), the *Ethics* takes its bearings from and is addressed to morally serious persons. Moreover, it is simultaneously addressed to two distinct types of morally serious persons: those who are not and never will be philosophers *and* those who are potential philosophers.

It is necessary to add one further qualification to this characterization of the audience of the *Ethics* in light of Aristotle’s initial subordination of ethics to politics (1.2.1094a26–b11). Aristotle writes that, whereas it may be valuable to secure the good for a single individual, it is even nobler and more divine to do so for a people and for a city (1.2.1094b9–10). This, Aristotle later explains, is the wish and goal of every decent legislator, namely, to make citizens good by habituating them to virtue through properly framed laws (2.1.1103b3–6). The aim of legislators and the aim of Aristotle’s study overlap in this important respect.²⁴ Viewed in this light, Aristotle’s emphasis on a student’s need for experience seems to refer especially to political experience (cf. 1.3.1095a2–4). Aristotle’s study is directed not only to those who are attracted to moral goodness, but also and perhaps especially to those legislators, or at least potential legislators, with some experience of politics.

Although I agree with Bodéüs on this point, I am not convinced that Aristotle intends to rule out both lower and higher possibilities. There is no reason to assume that Aristotle’s writing is one dimensional in the sense that it is *restricted* to lawmakers. Rather, Aristotle also and simultaneously appeals to well-disposed young persons who are drawn to a moral-political excellence they do not yet fully possess (see esp. 2.2.1103b26–30; 10.9.1179b2–4) and, at crucial junctures in his argument, to those who are capable of a type of excellence that in some way

transcends the political horizon altogether. The problematic aim of the *Ethics* might be stated in the following way. Aristotle attempts to offer guidance for those who are disposed to an active life of political involvement rather than the rigors and pleasures of philosophic inquiry and who may even view the latter with suspicion. At the same time, however, he will try to point his most gifted students to a way of life that does not fall entirely within the horizon of *orthos logos* by inviting them to contemplate something of the radical and more fully satisfying character of the philosophic life. I hope to show that greater attentiveness to Aristotle's dual audience—nonphilosophers and potential philosophers—reveals an underlying consistency despite the apparent inconsistency attributed to him regarding his teaching on the best way of life.

THE USEFUL IMPRECISION OF BOOK I

The view that Aristotle is advocating either an “inclusive” or “exclusive” understanding of happiness in the opening book of his study is, I believe, mistaken. A more accurate description of the argument as it stands could affirm that Aristotle moves his readers toward an inclusive view of happiness as a composite of virtuous activities, but that he qualifies this conclusion at the last moment by asserting that happiness consists in the activity of the best or most complete virtue. As Ackrill rightly points out, the reader is unprepared for this twist in Aristotle's argument, but, contrary to Ackrill's interpretation, nothing prevents Aristotle's unexplained qualification in the present context from being an anticipation or foreshadowing of a view that, for pedagogical reasons, he discloses only at a later point in his study. Ackrill fails to give sufficient weight to the fact that the passage in question (esp. 1.7.1098a16–20) is qualified by the immediately following remark. Aristotle maintains that we should allow the argument to serve as an outline and that it provides no more than a rough sketch that can be filled in later (1.7.1098a20–22). Consistent with this qualification, the following overview of Book I reflects a degree of precision (or imprecision) on this issue that Aristotle deems appropriate at the outset of his study.

Happiness or “human flourishing” (*eudaimonia*) is taken by Aristotle to be the good at which all human actions aim (chs. 1–4). His study of ethics seeks to turn students away from diminished understandings of happiness and to direct them toward more humanly satisfying ones. Accordingly, Aristotle takes up the three views of happiness most in evi-

dence, namely, pleasure, honor, and study (ch. 5). In this initial consideration, the life of pleasure seeking is summarily dismissed with a kind of noble disdain, and a consideration of the theoretical life is postponed. By way of contrast, the life of action, particularly political action, is given greater scope. Although Aristotle initially brings readers to the salutary view that virtue rather than honor appears to constitute the appropriate end of political action, he concludes by emphasizing the incompleteness of all three views of happiness and the need for further investigation.

To advance the argument, Aristotle suggests that greater specificity about the nature of human happiness, though not complete clarity, would result from reflection upon a distinctively human activity or “work” (*ergon*) (ch. 7). “Work” along with “end” (*telos*) and “activity” (*energeia*) are used by Aristotle to indicate the characteristic activity of an animate being, one that reveals its specific and irreducible wholeness (cf. *Meta.* 9.8.1050a21–23). Aristotle observes that the distinctive “activity” or “work” of human animals is one that is in accordance with reason (*logos*) or at least not without it (1.7.1098a7–8). Moreover, the best human activity requires not just any expression of reason, but a fine or excellent one. Hence, the good for human beings, the core of human happiness, consists in those activities involving reason that express excellence or possibly several types of excellence (1.7.1098a16–18).²⁵

While acknowledging that unforeseen or uncontrollable forces affect the possibility of happiness (e.g., fortune, death, and the gods), the overriding argument of Book I invites readers to focus on the part of happiness that falls within a human compass (chs. 8–12).²⁶ The aspect of happiness that depends preeminently on human effort is the development and exercise of each individual’s capacity for excellence. This, Aristotle teaches, constitutes a core without which happiness is not attainable for a human being. The books that follow differentiate and clarify the particular excellences, both moral and intellectual, that perfect the human soul and, to that extent, constitute human happiness.

The foregoing sketch of Book I preserves the adumbrative quality of the argument as it is presented by Aristotle. The argument is imprecise, however, in a way that is especially appropriate given the didactic concern that guides the study as a whole. By suggesting the problematic character of the most common views concerning happiness, Aristotle invites his readers to think seriously about a question that many take for granted. Further, instead of launching a doctrine of his own, Aristotle

has suggested two orientation points that are conducive to serious reflection: happiness for human beings involves both reason (*logos*) and excellence (*aretē*). To state this negatively, the failure to develop one's capacities for both reason and excellence precludes the possibility of lasting happiness notwithstanding the many advantages that turn upon wealth, good birth, status, and power.

Aristotle's argument in Book I is compelling as far as it goes. It is hard to see how activities that fail to engage reason or are poorly carried out could result in lasting human happiness. Whatever philosophic difficulties are caused by Aristotle's imprecision, particularly, his failure to clarify the metaphysical or psychological premises of the *ergon* argument or to specify whether *eudaimonia* is a composite of virtues or a single dominant virtue, the argument is not only intelligible to decent and thoughtful readers, but invites them to wonder about the relationship between reason and excellence and the exact bearing of each on happiness. Moreover, since happiness results from the development or perfection of the human soul, and each of the virtues—moral and intellectual—contributes to that perfection, the open-ended character of Aristotle's treatment of happiness in Book I leads the reader to assume, initially at least, that *all* the virtues described in the following books of the *Ethics* are essential ingredients of human happiness.²⁷ Prior to his concluding argument in Book X, Aristotle exercises judicious silence about the exact relationship between moral and intellectual virtue. This restraint is not without an important pedagogical consequence since it allows Aristotle to elucidate the nature of moral virtue from the perspective of those who most embody it, those who, I have suggested, constitute the primary audience of the *Ethics*.

By taking his bearings from the best sensibilities of decent readers, Aristotle encourages greater reflectiveness, not by undermining decent opinion, but by presenting it with unprecedented clarity. As we shall see, this approach characterizes Aristotle's treatment of the particular moral virtues and gives rise to some of the most memorable and best known aspects of that teaching. Aristotle's doctrine of the "mean" is a case in point. An even more pertinent example is his repeated insistence that moral virtue is an end in itself and desirable for its own sake. Not only is this approach likely to appeal to and elevate the perspective of Aristotle's readers, it also provides a true depiction of the phenomenon of moral virtue itself. To present moral virtue as a means to some other end, or as derivative from metaphysical or psychological principles,

would distort that phenomenon as it appears in the lives of those who most embody it.

The way in which Aristotle presents moral virtue does not necessarily imply that his ethical teaching is devoid of any theoretical grounding.²⁸ Rather, the point is that Aristotle's solicitude for the majority of his decent readers requires that this derivation, should it exist, occupy a less than prominent place given the practical aim that he has assigned to his study. The result is a consideration of virtue and happiness that is both accessible to decent readers and, for the same reason, susceptible to accusations of inconsistency on the part of the most philosophic among them. Whatever apparent inconsistency is provoked by this approach, it is important to recognize that Aristotle's manner of proceeding is in fact perfectly consistent with the goal that he has set for his study: the *Ethics* aims less at imparting theoretical knowledge about human goodness and more at reinforcing and clarifying it, especially for those most keenly interested in invigorating the practice of virtue among fellow citizens.