

ARISTOTLE'S
Nicomachean Ethics



Book 1

CHAPTER ONE

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action as well as choice, is held to aim at some good.¹ Hence people have nobly² declared that the good is that at which all things aim. But there appears to be a certain difference among the ends: some ends are activities, others are certain works apart from the activities themselves, and in those cases in which there are certain ends apart from the actions, the works are naturally better than the activities.³

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1 · Aristotle introduces several central terms here: *technē*, a technical art or craft, such as shoemaking, and the knowledge that goes together with it; *praxis*, action, which issues from the parts of the soul characterized by longing and desiring; and *proairesis*, choice, closely tied to action. See the glossary for these and other key terms. The verb Aristotle uses here for “is held to” (*dokein*) is related to the noun translated as “opinion” (*doxa*); it may mean simply that something “seems” to be the case or that it is “held” to be so by opinion.

2 · *Kalōs*: the adverb related to a central term, *to kalon*, which has a range of meanings for which English requires at least three: “noble,” “beautiful,” and “fine.” It denotes (physical) beauty but also and above all, in the *Ethics*, what is admirable in a moral sense. It will be translated most frequently as “the noble” (“noble,” “nobly,” “in a noble manner”) and, in the rare cases in which it refers unambiguously to physical beauty, as “beautiful.” In the present instance, Aristotle may say that the declaration in question is a “noble” one because it expresses a noble sentiment—that all things aim at the good—but not necessarily a true one: the conclusion drawn does not in fact follow from the premises given in the first sentence.

3 · Another set of key terms is introduced here: *telē* (singular, *telos*), the “end” or goal of a thing; see also *teleios*, n. 37 below. *Energeiai* (singular, *energeia*), “activity,” means the state of being engaged in an act or the carrying out of a deed (*ergon*); it is thus related to the next term, *erga* (singular, *ergon*). *Ergon* cannot be captured by one English word; it may be translated as “work,” “product,” “task” or—especially when used in contrast to “speech” (*logos*)—“deed.”

Now, since there are many actions, arts, and sciences,⁴ the ends too are many: of medicine, the end is health; of shipbuilding, a ship; of generalship, victory; of household management, wealth. And in all things of this sort that fall under some one capacity⁵—for just as bridle making and such other arts as concern equestrian gear fall under horsemanship, while this art and every action related to warfare fall under generalship, so in the same manner, some arts fall under one capacity, others under another—in *all* of them, the ends of the architectonic ones are more choice-worthy than all those that fall under them, for these latter are pursued for the sake of the former. And it makes no difference at all whether the ends of the actions are the activities themselves or something else apart from these, as in the sciences mentioned.

CHAPTER TWO

If, therefore, there is some end of our actions that we wish for on account of itself, the rest being things we wish for on account of this end, and if we do not choose all things on account of something else—for in this way the process will go on infinitely such that the longing⁶ involved is empty and pointless—clearly this would be the good, that is, the best.⁷ And with a view to our life, then, is not the knowledge of this good of great weight, and would we not, like archers in possession of a target, better hit on what is needed? If this is so, then one must try to grasp, in outline at least, whatever it is and to which of the sciences or capacities it belongs.

But it might be held to belong to the most authoritative and most architectonic one,⁸ and such appears to be the political art.⁹ For it or-

4 · Or, “knowledge” in the strict sense (*epistēmē*, here in the plural). We use “science” or “scientific knowledge” to distinguish *epistēmē* from the other term Aristotle uses for knowledge, *gnōsis*.

5 · Or, “power” (*dunamis*), here and throughout.

6 · This is the first instance of the term *orexis*, which we translate as “longing” and which refers in general to the appetency of the soul, of which *epithumia*, “desire,” is a species. The term is related to the verb *oregein*, which we translate as “to long for.”

7 · *To ariston*: the superlative of *to agathon*, “the good.” Although some translators render this term as the “highest” or “chief” good, we consistently translate it as “the best” to capture the sense that it is indeed a peak but may also be simply the best of the goods available to human beings.

8 · “One” might refer to “science” (*epistēmē*), “art” (*technē*), or “capacity” (*dunamis*).

9 · Aristotle here uses substantively the feminine singular adjective *politikē* (the political), without therefore specifying the noun it is meant to modify, as can be easily done

dains what sciences there must be in cities and what kinds each person in turn must learn and up to what point. We also see that even the most honored capacities—for example, generalship, household management, rhetoric—fall under the political art. Because it makes use of the remaining¹⁰ sciences and, further, because it legislates what one ought to do and what to abstain from, its end would encompass those of the others, with the result that this would be the human good. For even if this is the same thing for an individual and a city, to secure and preserve the good of the city appears to be something greater and more complete: the good of the individual by himself is certainly desirable enough, but that of a nation and of cities is nobler and more divine. 1094b

The inquiry, then, aims at these things, since it is a sort of political inquiry. 5

CHAPTER THREE

The inquiry would be adequately made if it should attain the clarity that accords with the subject matter. For one should not seek out precision in *all* arguments alike, just as one should not do so in the products of craftsmanship either. The noble things and the just things, which the political art examines, admit of much dispute and variability, such that they are held to exist by law¹¹ alone and not by nature. And even the good things admit of some such variability on account of the harm that befalls many people as a result of them: it has happened that some have been destroyed on account of their wealth, others on account of their courage. 15

It would certainly be desirable enough, then, if one who speaks about and on the basis of such things demonstrate the truth roughly and in outline, and if, in speaking about and on the basis of things that are for the most part so, one draw conclusions of that sort as well. Indeed, in the same manner one must also accept each of the points being made. For it 20

in Greek. “Science,” “art,” or “capacity” are all grammatically possible. We will translate the word consistently by (the) “political art”; the ending *-ikē* generally indicates that an art (*technē*) is involved.

10 · The MSS add at this point the word *practical* (or sciences “related to action”: *praktikais*), but Bywater, followed by Stewart and Burnet, deletes it. One MS omits the word translated as “remaining.”

11 · Or, “convention,” “custom” (*nomos*); this is the first appearance of this important term.