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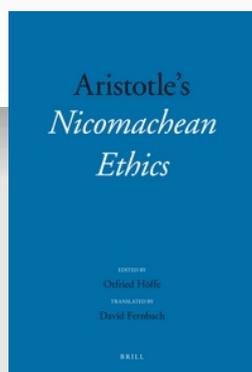
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Aristotle On Eudaimonia (Book I.1-5 [1-3] And 7-8 [5-6])



Author: [John L. Ackrill](#)

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CHAPTER THREE

ARISTOTLE ON *EUDAIMONIA* (BOOK I.1–5 [1–3] AND 7–8 [5–6])

JOHN L. ACKRILL

1

Like most great philosophical works Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* raises more questions than it answers. Two central issues as to which it is not even quite clear what Aristotle's view really is are, first, what is the criterion of right action and of moral virtue? and, second, what is the best life for a man to lead? The first question is raised very explicitly by Aristotle himself at the beginning of Book 6, where he recalls that moral virtue (or excellence of character) was defined as a mean determined by the rule or standard that the wise man would employ, and now says that this statement though true was not clear: we need also to discover what *is* the right rule and what *is* the standard that fixes it. Unfortunately he does not subsequently take up this question in any direct way. The difficulty about the second question is not that he fails to discuss it—it is after all the center of his target—or that he fails to answer it, but that he seems to give two answers. Most of the *Ethics* implies that good action is—or is a major element in—man's best life, but eventually in Book 10 purely contemplative activity is said to be perfect *eudaimonia*; and Aristotle does not tell us how to combine or relate these two ideas.

One way of answering the two questions brings them into close connection. For if Aristotle really holds, in the end, that it is contemplation (*theôria*) that is *eudaimonia*, a possible or even inevitable answer to the first question is that right actions are right precisely in virtue of their making possible or in some way promoting *theôria*, and that the states of character commendable as virtues or excellences are so commendable because they are states that favor the one ultimately worthwhile state and activity, the state of theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) and the activity of *theôria*. Professors Gauthier and Jolif, in their admirable commentary (1958–1959) take some such view; and since they recognize that

Aristotle sometimes stresses the “immanent character” of moral action, but they find here a major incoherence in his thought. They themselves try to explain why he falls into this incoherence (recognizing the intrinsic value of virtuous actions and yet treating them as “means to arrive at happiness”) by suggesting that in his account of action he brings into play ideas that properly apply not to actions but to productive activities—Aristotle fails to free himself from an inappropriate way of speaking and from an associated way of thinking.

Professor Hintikka too has argued recently (1973) that Aristotle remained enslaved to a certain traditional Greek way of thought (“conceptual teleology”) and that this is why his analysis of human action uses an ends-and-means schema though this “does not sit very happily with some of the kinds of human action which he considered most important” (54). According to Hintikka, since Aristotle could not “accommodate within his conceptual system” an activity that did not have an end (*telos*) he had to provide a *telos* even for activities he wanted precisely to distinguish from productive activities, and so he fell into the absurdity of speaking of an activity of the former kind as *its own end*.

Mr. Hardie (1965), also believing that Aristotle fails in Book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to think clearly about means and ends, claims that this fact helps to explain why he confuses the idea of an “inclusive” end and the idea of a “dominant” end. Hardie attributes to Aristotle an “occasional insight” into the thought that the best life will involve a variety of aims and interests, but finds that the other doctrine—that *eudaimonia* must be identified with one supremely desired activity—is Aristotle’s standard view, and not merely something to which he moves in Book 1. Dr. Kenny (1966) agrees in interpreting Book 1 as treating the pursuit of *eudaimonia* as the pursuit of a single dominant aim: “Aristotle considers happiness only in the dominant sense” (101).

In this lecture I should like to question some of the views about the *Nicomachean Ethics* that I have been outlining. In particular I shall con-

that in Book 1 (and generally until Book 10) Aristotle is expounding “inclusive” doctrine of *eudaimonia*, and that there is no need to suppose that he was led into confusion on this matter by some inadequacy in his understanding of means and ends.



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