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## ETHICS: FOURTH CENTURY B.C. AND TWENTIETH CENTURY A.D.

MORTIMER J. ADLER

( II )

**T**he pursuit of happiness is the same for all, so far as the attainment of real goods is concerned, but different for different individuals according to differences in the apparent goods that we want, resulting from individual differences in temperament, nurture, and the differing circumstances of time and place.

Nothing that we have discovered by experimental or empirical investigation in modern scientific psychology alters in one jot or tittle the main truths in Aristotle's philosophical psychology, as I think I have conclusively shown in a book entitled *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes* (1967). Hence the reason for rejecting Aristotle's *Ethics* as no longer tenable in the twentieth century cannot be that we now know that his account of human nature is false and so his moral philosophy is without foundation. It may

not be generally acceptable in the academic world today, but that is quite different from asserting that it is false.

Another way of saying the same thing is to call attention to the accounts given in antiquity of human life, of human problems, and of the ways human beings succeed or fail in solving them. When we read the two great epics of Homer, the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, the histories of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Tacitus, and the biographies written by Plutarch (which President Truman read regularly to understand what was going on in Washington), we cannot fail to acknowledge that human beings were the same in Greek and Roman antiquity as they are today.

They are, humanly speaking, our contemporaries, even though our institutions differ from theirs and the external conditions of our lives differ even more remarkably from theirs. But our moral problems do not differ from theirs. Success and failure in solving these problems depend on the same two indispensable factors—moral virtue and the blessings of good fortune—both necessary, neither by itself sufficient. That, in brief, is the central teaching of Aristotle's *Ethics*.

Another charge that Professor Williams levels against the acceptability of Aristotle's *Ethics* is that ancient moral thought was egoistic—too self-centered, too much emphasis on the individual's own personal happiness and not enough concern with the individual's obligation to the well-being of others (pp. 8, 14, 35, 49). But on all of these points, Professor Williams's understanding of Aristotle's *Ethics* is, I believe, deficient.

In the first place, he has overlooked the fact that, for Aristotle, happiness (or a morally good human life as a whole) is a common good, the same for all men. When the individual directs his life toward happiness as the final end of all his actions, he is aiming not only at his own ultimate goal, but at the ultimate goal he shares with all other individuals, because all are human beings like himself.

Second, justice is one of the four aspects of moral virtue by which the individual chooses means to this ultimate goal, and justice is concerned with the happiness of others. The morally virtuous man in seeking his own happiness through temperate, courageous, and prudent choices (the three other aspects of his moral virtue) also seeks it through just choices. [5]

What are such choices? Negatively, not to do anything that injures others and either frustrates or prevents them from succeeding in their pursuit of happiness. Positively, to act for the good of the organized community, the public common good, in which all individuals participate and which contributes to their individual happiness by providing them with real goods they need to lead good lives, goods they cannot obtain for themselves entirely by their own efforts. The best State, says Aristotle in the *Politics*, is one that aims at the happiness of all its citizens.

Still another objection that Professor Williams makes to the contemporary acceptability of Aristotle's *Ethics* is that his conception of virtue "no longer has any, or enough, sense for us" (p. 206, n. 7); that the virtues today are "unpopular as an ethical conception" (p. 10); and that any list of virtues we today would draw up would differ markedly from Aristotle's catalog of them, thus showing "how pictures of an appropriate human life may differ in spirit and in the actions and institutions they call for" (p. 153).

Once again, Professor Williams has failed to observe the crucial passages at the end of Book VI where Aristotle argues soundly for the unity of moral virtue and for the existential inseparability of all the various aspects of moral virtue he inventories at length in Books III and IV. Aristotle alone maintains that there is only moral virtue in its singleness, one habit of right direction to the end of life and of the right choice of means, not a plurality of numerous, existentially distinct, virtues.

Not even his most docile disciple, Thomas Aquinas, agrees with him on this central point, while agreeing with him that the four cardinal aspects of moral virtue are temperance, courage, justice, and prudence. All other aspects of moral virtue are affiliated with and subordinate to these four cardinal aspects of moral virtue as a single, integral habit of right choice of means to a rightly appointed end—a good life as a whole.

Nor does it follow, as Professor Williams thinks it does, that because our social and cultural life differs markedly from that of the ancients, so too must our ethical thought differ from theirs (pp. 3-4, 18). Granted that our social and cultural life differs from theirs, our fundamental moral problems remain the same.

Professor Williams also neglects two essential and quite original contributions that Aristotle makes to moral philosophy. One is his distinction between theoretic or descriptive truth, as defined in

Metaphysics, Book IV, 4-5 (GBWW, Vol. 8, pp. 525a-30c), and practical, normative or prescriptive truth, as defined in Ethics, Book VI, 2 (GBWW, Vol. 9, pp. 387d-88a). Here, Aristotle tells us that such truth is not the conformity of the mind's descriptive judgments (is and is not) to what in reality is or is not, but rather the conformity of the mind's prescriptive judgments (ought and ought not) to right desire.

The other is the distinction made (in *Ethics*, Book III, 4-5; GBWW, Vol. 9, pp. 359a-61a) between (1) natural desires that, rooted in man's natural potentialities, are our basic needs, the same for all human beings, and (2) acquired desires—the wants that result from nurture, training, and experience and therefore differ as individuals differ from one another in their temperaments and biographies.

These two distinctions taken together constitute the core of Aristotle's *Ethics*. All our natural desires or needs are right desires, so we ought to want what we need, for those are the things that are really good for us. The one self-evident principle of moral philosophy is that we *ought* to seek everything that is really good for us and nothing else. The principle is undeniable because the opposite is unthinkable. [6]

The objects we want in addition are only apparently good, deemed good because we want them, but only so regarded when we want them, not later when we may regret having obtained them. They may turn out to be really bad for us. Those that do not turn out to be really bad are innocuous apparent goods; and we are permitted to include the satisfaction of such innocuous wants in our pursuit of happiness. It is only in this respect that one individual's happiness or morally good life differs from another individual's.

Professor Williams is quite right in calling attention to the grievous errors Aristotle made about natural slaves and the inferiority of women to men. But when we expunge those errors of fact, the essential moral truth of Aristotle's *Ethics* remains intact and undisturbed.

Saint Augustine incompletely summed up that moral truth by saying, in his little treatise on The Happy Life, that happy is the man who, in a complete life, obtains everything he desires, provided he desires nothing amiss. This statement stresses the role moral virtue, or right desire, plays in the pursuit of happiness and implies the distinction between real and apparent goods. But it omits the role that the blessings of good fortune play.

Aristotle takes account of that in his own summary statement when he says in *Ethics*, 1, 10 (*GBWW*, Vol. 9, pp. 345c-46c), that happiness consists in a complete life well lived in accordance with moral virtue (a rightly habituated will), and accompanied by a moderate possession of health and wealth along with other external goods that are, to some degree, beyond the power of the individual to obtain by his or her own efforts, and that are, therefore, the blessings of good fortune.

Moral virtue and good fortune are both necessary; but neither by itself is sufficient. The morally virtuous individual may be a morally good human being, but he or she may be prevented from completing a good life by accidents beyond the individual's control.


Finally, Professor Williams holds a view of the advances made by philosophy in the twentieth century that is both wrong, in my judgment, and also detrimental to his own thesis that Aristotle's *Ethics* was a good philosophical book in antiquity but one that does not measure up to contemporary standards of good philosophical writing.

He says that philosophy today is more rigorous and stringently analytical than it was in Greek antiquity; and in consequence, that we are rightfully more skeptical than Aristotle about reason's reflective powers to achieve philosophical truth (p. 3).

That statement undermines the praise that Williams later in his book showers on Aristotle as a relatively sound moral philosopher in antiquity. But it is also questionable whether all the gimmicks of analytical and linguistic philosophy in the twentieth century, trying to solve pseudo-problems inherited from the preceding three centuries of philosophical thought, constitute a real advance in philosophical thought.

The fundamental mistakes of modern philosophy, none of which were made by Aristotle, remain uncorrected today by contemporary thinkers whom Professor Williams regards as philosophically superior to Aristotle. That they are more skeptical than Aristotle in dealing with metaphysical and moral problems is certainly true, but that they are rightfully so is highly questionable.

Above all I would contend that the basic premises of Aristotle's philosophical psychology (his conception of human nature) are true, whereas the psychological presuppositions of contemporary

positivism and of modern analytical and linguistic philosophy are false. That is what makes Aristotle's *Ethics* sound and also accounts for the bankruptcy of moral philosophy since the seventeenth century. 

## Notes

**5** For Aristotle, there was no question of the primacy of the good over the right the good being the object of desire, the right being the object of duty or obligation. We cannot possibly know what is right for everyone else (and, hence, what our obligations are in doing justice in our treatment of them), unless we first know what is really good for ourselves. It is Bernard Williams's failure to recognize this fact that causes him and other contemporary philosophers to charge Aristotle's *Ethics* with being egotistic and self-centered.

**6** Because the foundation of Aristotle's Ethics lies in his understanding of human nature and its natural needs, it can be called a naturalistic moral philosophy, in sharp contrast to the excessive rationalism of Kantian moral philosophy, which tries to find a foundation in the categorical imperative of human reason. In the twentieth century, John Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct* comes very close to being an Aristotelian and naturalistic moral philosophy (especially in view of the fact that habit is so central a factor in it), but it is crucially flawed by Dewey's denial that there can be for us any good that is a final or ultimate end that obliges us to choose certain means and reject others. Dewey's error consists in his failure to understand the difference between an ultimate and terminal end in this life (which is death), and a final, normative end (namely, a morally good life as a whole, a life well lived), which should control at every moment in this life our choice of the means for pursuing happiness.

In recent years there has been a surprising recrudescence of naturalistic ethics and of treatises about the centrality of virtue in living well. See Christopher J. Berry's *Human Nature*, Stephen D. Hudson's *Human Character and Morality*, J. Budziszewski's *The Resurrection of Nature*, and D. S. Hutchinson's *The Virtues of Aristotle*.

From the 1988 edition of *The Great Ideas Today*.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

I just renewed my membership with the Center, and I want to take a moment to encourage those wavering in their commitment to do the same. On a material level, just receiving the Weekly Journals makes renewal worthwhile. Those regular essays on various philosophical considerations help remind one of the joys of study and reading. As for intangibles, knowing there are others committed to common culture and bettering the human condition is immeasurable.

To Max and all others working to keep the Center going, I wish you all the best.

Tim Lacy

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 CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS  
 Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann  
 Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor  
 E-mail: [TGIdeas@speedsite.com](mailto:TGIdeas@speedsite.com)  
 Homepage: <http://www.thegreatideas.org/>

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