Introduction

Philosophers and classicists have recently turned their attentions to Aristotle’s ethics, particularly to the *Nicomachean Ethics*. While they have been at great pains to reconstruct the historical Aristotle rather than to mine him for insights he might not have recognized as his, the interest that classical philosophers have in these issues is not merely historical or antiquarian.

Some of the impetus for the return to Aristotelian scholarship in ethics has come from a sense of the impoverishment of recent moral philosophy. In the wake of the influence of emotivism in ethics, moral philosophers concentrated on meta-ethical issues, on methodological problems in moral reasoning. They were concerned to analyze the meanings of moral terms or concepts and to map the relations among them (e.g., do judgments about what is *right* presuppose those about what is *good*?); they also examined the logical status of moral imperatives, the rules for valid arguments in ethics (e.g., must conclusions about obligations rest on arguments that are not empirical?). The primary battles were between naturalists, who thought that ethical assertions and imperatives could be supported by empirical arguments, and those who thought that moral imperatives ultimately require a ground of obligation that no factual considerations could provide.

But not all recent moral philosophy is methodological in character. Moral philosophers in the Kantian tradition attempt to establish the necessary a priori principles to which moral reasoning must conform and by
which moral reasoning must be (freely) motivated. They want to determine the conditions for rational moral agency. When they deal with specific moral issues, their question is: what does rationality require? The question whether human beings are rational in the required sense, whether rational moral motivation can provide a model of characteristic psychological motivation, is covered, on the philosophical side, by the dictum that “ought implies can.” The actual investigation of the connections between rational and psychological motivation is delegated to the empirical sciences, whose results were thought to be in principle irrelevant to the analysis of the necessary conditions for morality.

In contrast, utilitarians do not draw sharp distinctions between philosophical and empirical investigations. They take the evaluation of actions or practices, rather than of motivating principles, to be the proper domain of ethics. The task of the moral philosopher is primarily to determine the principles by which to guide policy decisions and secondarily to evaluate such policies. But utilitarians discovered unexpected difficulties in applying the principle of utility to generate specific policy decisions. Some of these problems—problems about constructing a calculus to measure happiness (or utiles)—were regarded as technical difficulties in the theory. How are the various measures of happiness—intensity, complexity, duration, range—to be weighted? How are interpersonal comparisons of utility to be measured? Other problems that utilitarians now face are moral rather than technical. It has been argued that the consistent application of act utilitarianism generates moral decisions that violate common moral sensibility. On the utilitarian principle it would be right to punish the innocent if doing so could promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The only thing wrong with such a policy would be that adopting it might generate more harm than benefits: in itself it could not be wrong.

Aristotle's perspective on the issues of moral philosophy is entirely different from the perspective of either Kantians or utilitarians. He writes the *Nicomachean Ethics* for those who have the traits, constitutions, and some of the habits that would enable them to become virtuous, for those capable of responsible action, and particularly for those who might be statesmen. His emphasis is on character and its proper development rather than on the rules for the propriety of rational motives or for the evaluation of the consequences of actions. Ethics appears firmly within psychology, and it moves to political theory. Since ethics is practical, issuing in particular actions, it requires a dialectical, rather than a scientifically demonstrative, approach. We cannot deduce moral truths from universal necessary premises. Nevertheless, general truths established by reasoned investigations into common beliefs and common practices,
along with an understanding of the general constitutions and character of
the species, can give a solid, though not a certain, basis for generalization
in ethics.

But the recent return to a study of Aristotle is no more motivated by
the attractions of naive and patchwork eclecticism than it is by the
delights of antiquarian researches. We cannot use Aristotle to solve prob-
lems within the Kantian and utilitarian systems. The problems of those
systems do not arise, and can barely even be formulated, within Aris-
totle's ethics; much less can they find their proper solution there. By the
same token one could not show that Aristotle was free of those problems.
What attracts contemporary classical philosophers to Aristotle's ethics is
rather the investigation of a self-contained, enormously illuminating
theory, rich in practical consequences as well as in theoretical insights.

Characteristically, Aristotle canvasses previous opinions on a large
range of subjects: What is happiness? What are the conditions for respon-
sible and voluntary action? How does a person become virtuous? In what
does virtue consist, and how are the virtues to be characterized? What is
the contribution of intellectual knowledge to the moral practical life?
What is pleasure? What are the respective claims of the practical political
life and the contemplative life? Aristotle's own account is constructed by
attempting to do justice to the varieties of previous opinions.

The articles in this collection are arranged to form a continuous com-
mentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* following the organization and
sequence of discussions and arguments of that book. There is consider-
able scholarly debate about whether the *Nicomachean Ethics* forms a
continuous whole: there is some evidence that the central "common"
books—Books 5-7—really belong to the *Eudemian Ethics*; and there is a
consensus that the *NE* is a compendium of lecture notes. But tracing the
pattern of the present organization of the book is quite independent of
determining whether that organization was imposed by an editor (or by
Aristotle himself), who took material from different strata of Aristotle's
writing, incorporating earlier material into much later work. Even if the
book is a thing composed of threads and patches, the organization of
those threads and patches composes a perfectly coherent pattern.

The *Ethics* begins with the question "What is the good for man?" After
a dialectical survey of opinion on the subject, it presents the claim that
eudaimonía—happiness, or, as it has sometimes been translated, human
flourishing—is the good for man. Happiness is then defined as an activity
of the soul in accordance with rationality and virtue, with human excel-
ience. But since there are several types of excellence, the question arises:
Which is the best and most complete? Does happiness consist in an active
and comprehensive practical life or in the exercise of man's highest and
Introduction

best faculties, those for contemplation? The papers by Thomas Nagel and J. L. Ackrill pose this question.

What are the metaphysical and psychological presuppositions that guide and inform Aristotle’s discussions in the *Ethics*? How do the final causes of a species define the excellences of that species? What metaphysical views about the actualization of potentialities stand behind the arguments in the *Ethics*? David J. Furley’s “Self-Movers” and T. H. Irwin’s “The Metaphysical and Psychological Basis of Aristotle’s Ethics” investigate these questions.

The definition of virtue is offered in Book 2: Virtue is a dispositional characteristic, a *hexit* concerning actions and reactions (*pathe*) involving choice; it consists in acting in a mean relative to us, a mean that is defined by a rational principle of the sort followed by a person of practical wisdom. The substance of Books 2-6 consists of an analysis of the components and consequences of this definition.

*Virtue is a hexis*: The development of proper habits, especially habits concerning pleasures, is the key to the moral life. The article by M. F. Burnyeat gives an account of Aristotle’s views about how to become good and how a person’s ends, his actions, and his thoughts are developed through practice.

*Virtue is a hexis concerning actions*: Aristotle turns in Book 3 to an account of voluntary action. Ackrill’s “Aristotle on Action” is an analysis of Aristotle’s account of how action is distinguished from behavior and how actions are identified by the agent’s intentions.

*Virtue is a hexis concerning actions and pathe*: L. A. Kosman analyzes the much-neglected function of (proper) reactions and emotions in moral life. He discusses the relations between *pathos* and *praxis*, asking whether habits of pathe can be developed in the same way as habits of praxis.

*Virtue is a hexis... involving choice*: In Book 3 Aristotle gives an analysis of the conditions for voluntary and for deliberate action. For an action to be voluntary, it is necessary that the agent could have done otherwise, that he knew what he was doing, that he was not compelled. In “Reason and Responsibility in Aristotle,” Irwin gives a detailed account of the presuppositions and consequences of Aristotle’s discussion of the conditions of responsible action.

*Virtue... consists in acting in a mean relative to us*: Aristotle next turns, in Book 4, to an analysis of the mean, and how it is to be found in a range of particular virtues. J. O. Urquhart gives an account of what it is to act “in a mean relative to us”: he defends Aristotle against charges of recommending mediocre moderation. Books 3-5 give an account of the range of traditional virtues, showing how they involve acting in the mean. David Pears takes one of the most difficult of these—courage—
and discusses Aristotle's attempt to construe it as involving action within the mean. Bernard Williams analyzes Aristotle's treatment of justice, arguing that there is an ambiguity in the discussion: Aristotle wavers between defining justice as a character trait and defining it by a set of rules.

Virtue . . . consists in acting in a mean defined by a rational principle: In Book 6 Aristotle gives an account of the intellectual activities and their contributions to practical life. Richard Sorabji's "Aristotle on the Role of Intellect in Virtue" gives an account of the various intellectual virtues and their practical applications.

Virtue . . . consists in acting in a mean defined by a rational principle such as would be used by a person of wisdom: The article by David Wiggins examines the relation between the ends of the phronimos and his practical reasoning. He discusses the way in which those ends become ingredient in and constitutive of actions. In his paper on the weakness of the will, Wiggins shows how, on Aristotle's account, an agent's desires and patterns of deliberation are formed by, and express, his ends. He explores the ways in which this view of the relation between character and action leaves room for the phenomena of weakness of will.

Since Book 6 leaves us with a strong identification between virtue and practical wisdom, the question arises whether Aristotle has returned to Socratic intellectualism and whether he must treat all forms of wrongdoing as involuntary ignorance. Amélie O. Rorty examines the distinctions among the varieties of wrongdoing—vice, akrasia, and self-indulgence—resting on the distinctions among the intellectual virtues which are drawn in Book 6. She argues that the discussion of pleasure in Book 7 is meant to continue the discussion of akrasia: it provides an explanation of why the akrates forgets what he knows.

John M. Cooper analyzes Books 8 and 9, the extended discussion of friendship and its function in developing and exercising the self-reflective traits of the virtuous.

Because Aristotle still needs to establish that the virtuous life is happy and that it brings the goods and satisfactions traditionally associated with eudaimonia, he returns to a discussion of pleasure in Book 10. Julia Annas analyzes Aristotle's treatment of pleasure, discussing the relation between his theory and earlier, traditional theories.

After the discussion of pleasure, Aristotle returns to an examination of eudaimonia. John McDowell argues that eudaimonia is the end for the sake of which all action is taken, rather than the end for the sake of which it ought to be undertaken. His analysis leads him to a discussion of the proper domain of praxis as the subjects of prohairesis; of the proper significance of the ergon argument; of the appropriate reading of Aris-
totle's explanation of akrasia; and of the proper scope of Aristotle's notion of "the moral," in contrast with modern notions.

There are still some questions to be settled: the claims of the theoretical life as the most virtuous, happy life. The papers by Kathleen V. Wilkes and Rorty evaluate the respective claims of the practical and the theoretical life: they attempt to answer the questions posed by Nagel and Ackrill.

Book 10 ends with a transition to the tasks of the statesman, the tasks of constructing the sort of polity in which the citizens can lead virtuous lives. Martha Craven Nussbaum analyzes the ideals of self-realization and self-respect that guide Plato and Aristotle, contrasting their views on the relation between the political and the moral life.


We are also grateful to Gregory Vlastos, who despite his suspicions of what he regards as Aristotle's pernicious moral and political elitism, has influenced many of the contributors to this volume. Vlastos's work as a scholar, as a teacher and colleague, and as a man of practical wisdom in the academy has been responsible for some of the remarkable vitality of classical philosophy in recent years.