Nicomachean Ethics, Book I
Lecture on the Ideal Life
[*with some omissions*]
sample translation

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Every skill, every branch of philosophy, every action, every choice, appears to have some good thing as its goal. That's why I like that way of explaining 'good' as *the thing everything is aiming at*. But there seem to be two kinds of goal. Some are activities, others are the end products beyond them; and when there's a goal beyond the action itself, the end product is more important than the activity. There are lots things that people do, and lots of different skills and forms of knowledge, so there turn out to be lots of different goals. For example, the goal of a doctor's skill is health, the goal of the shipbuilder's, a ship; the goal of generalship is victory, and the goal of household management is wealth. Also, sometimes several skills fall under some single ability — e.g., bridle-making and the other skills to do with making gear for horses fall under horsemanship, and then horsemanship, along with every other activity of war, falls under generalship; and there are other similar examples. In all of those cases the goal of the top skill must be more important than the goals underneath it, since it's the reason we pursue them in the first place. And that applies whether it's activities themselves that are the goal of our actions, or something else beyond them, as in my examples.

So if there's *one* goal of doing *all* the things we do, something that we want for its own sake, the reason for wanting everything else — assuming that we're don't *always* have some further goal, or we'd be going on and on for ever, and our desires would be empty and pointless — then obviously that *one goal* must be *the ultimate good thing*. So, won't finding out about it have a big impact on our lives? Like archers, won't we be more likely to hit upon what's needed if we have a target? In that case, we should try, in outline at least, to get some idea of what it is, and what kind of knowledge or ability it falls under.

It ought to fall under the most authoritative one; the one at the very top — and that seems to be the knowledge of the *citizen* or *statesman*. That's the one that decides which of the other forms of knowledge should even exist in city-states in the first place, and which ones each class of people should learn, and for how long. And notice that even the most prestigious

abilities — those of the general, the estate-manager, and the public orator — fall under it. Statesmanship *makes use of* all the other forms of knowledge, and it even sets the laws that determine exactly how we may and may not behave. So its goal surely embraces the goals of all the others: its goal must be to secure *the top good for human beings*. Even if that's the same thing for an individual as for a state, it seems a far finer thing, and more complete, to win it and keep it for a whole state. We should be glad enough to give it even to one solitary person, of course; but more honourable, and more divine, is to create it in a nation, and in city-states. So that's what this branch of philosophy is aiming at — it's a kind of *political* philosophy.

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Our claims will be good enough if they're as detailed as our subject matter allows. We don't demand mathematical exactness in things made by craftsmen, and we shouldn't always be looking for it to the same degree in every area of philosophy either. There's a lot of variety and vagueness in what's honourable and shameful, right and wrong — the things that political philosophy investigates. So much so that sometimes people even think that they only exist by social convention, rather than by nature. Even what's good or bad for us shows the same kind of vagueness, because people often find themselves being harmed by supposedly good things. People are sometimes destroyed by their wealth, for instance, or by their bravery. So we should be happy, in making claims about these kinds of things, to set out the truth in a rough outline, and given that we're making claims based on, and about, what's *generally* the case, we'll have to be satisfied with conclusions that are only *generally* true. An educated person only looks for precision in a given area as far as the nature of the subject lets him. Expecting scientific proof from a man speaking on a political question is about as silly as accepting mathematical claims just because they 'sound reasonable.'

Each of us can judge the things he knows about; you're only a good judge of what you know — something particular if you've been educated in that area, and of life in general only if you've had a good all-round upbringing. That's why young people shouldn't be taking this sort of course in political philosophy. The problem is that they lack experience of life, and that's what our ideas in this course draw from, and that's what they're about. And since young people always act on their emotions, taking the course would be a waste of time anyway; it wouldn't do them any good — given that our goal

here isn't just the *knowing*, but the *doing*. And that goes for people who are immature in character, too, as opposed to young in years. What's missing isn't a simple matter of time; the problem is if you live by your emotions and pursue things impulsively. If you're like that, *knowing* what you should do doesn't help, any more than if you have no self-control. But if you can shape your desires and act according to ideas, then knowing about these things can do you a lot of good.

I wanted to open with these points about who should be taking the course, how you should be aiming to take on what you learn, and what we're trying to figure out. Now let's start.

4

Let's take it up from where we were. Assuming that every kind of knowledge and every choice that we make aims at some kind of good, what exactly is the *top* good, the goal of all the things we do — thing that we're saying political and ethical philosophy aims for? There's very general agreement about what it's called, at any rate: 'an ideal life' — that's what ordinary people call it, as well as people of more refinement; and they all take that to be same thing as 'living well' or 'doing well'. But as for what the ideal life exactly is, everyone disagrees, and most people are at odds with philosophers. Most people say it should be some plain and obvious thing like a life of pleasure, riches, or fame. Plus, everyone has his own view, and often even the same person can have conflicting ideas about it: his goal in life, when he's ill, is to be healthy, and then when he's poor, to be rich. And sometimes people admit that they have no idea themselves and are taken in by whoever makes some pretentious claim about it that goes over their heads. ...

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Let's start again from where we got sidetracked. Judging by the way they actually live, most people, the lowest sort of people, seem to believe — not totally unreasonably — that the ultimate good thing in life is *pleasure*. All they want is the life of maximum gratification. I should explain: there are three basic styles of life — that one, the life of the citizen or statesman, and the philosophical life. So, as I was saying, ordinary people basically want a life of well-fed cows. That may seem utterly slavish of them, but they can argue their case by pointing to the fact that so many powerful people — free to live as they choose — behave like Sardanapalus. People of more refinement, and men of action, think the highest good is *honour*. Honour is pretty much the goal of a life of the active citizen. But then again, isn't honour too superficial

to be what we're looking for? It seems to depend on the people who *give* the honour rather than on the man who gets it, and our hunch is that the highest good ought to be something that isn't given to you by anyone else, and isn't easily taken away from you. What's more, people seem to pursue honour because they want reassurance that they're good men. At any rate, they want to be honoured by sensible people who know them well, and for being good men. That suggests that according to those people being good is more important than honour. So you might well think that being a good man is the real goal of the life of the citizen. But even that seems somehow not enough. After all, it seems perfectly possible for someone to be a good man and to be asleep for the whole of his life, or never actually do anything; what's more, a good man can suffer the most awful disasters and misfortunes, and no one would say that someone like that was still living an ideal life — except maybe a philosopher, determined to stick to his theory. But we don't need to go into all this. I've said enough about it in my public writings. As for the third kind of life, the philosophical life, we'll be taking a careful look at that later in the course.

As for the life of making money — that's a life you'd have to be forced into. Wealth *clearly* isn't the highest good, the one that we're looking for, because it's just something we *use*. It's only for getting other things with. So the highest good is more likely to be one of those other goals we just mentioned; at least they're valued for their own sake. But it doesn't seem to be any of those either. And yet plenty of arguments have been made in support of them, and knocked down. So let's not spend any more time on them.

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Let's go back again to the thing we're trying to figure out: *What is the top good thing?*

We said that there seems to be a different good thing for each activity and skill — one for medicine, one for generalship, and so on. So, in each field, what do we mean by 'the good' of it? Presumably it's what provides the reason for doing all the other things. For doctors, that's health; for generals, it's victory; for builders, it's a house. In each case it's something different, but for every activity and every choice it's the goal. In each case the goal is what provides the reason for doing everything else they do. So, if there's an overall goal of all the things that we do (or more than one) then that (or they) would be the highest achievable good.

So we shifted the argument, but ended up back at the same place. We have to try to set this out even more clearly.

So there are these various goals. But some of them are things we want only as a means to something else — wealth, for instance, is a means; and flutes, and instruments and tools in general. So they obviously can't all be *final* goals. But the highest good ought to be something final. So, if there's some single and *final* goal in life, that would be the thing we're looking for, and if there are more than one, then it's whichever is the most final. Here's what I mean by 'final': a goal we pursue for its own sake is more 'final' than one we pursue as a means to something else. And a goal that's never a means to anything else is more final than the ones that we value partly for their own sake and partly as a means to something else. So in general, a final goal is something we always want for itself and never as means to something else. And of course, that applies to the ideal life more than to anything else. An ideal life is something we want *strictly* for its own sake, never as a means to something else; whereas we want honour, pleasure, intelligence, and every ethical quality, yes, *partly* for their own sake (i.e., even if we got nothing else out of them, we'd still want to have them) — but also *as a means to an ideal life*. That is, we think that *through* those things we'll be living an ideal life. But nobody wants to live an ideal life *so as to have those things*, or indeed as a means to anything else at all.

We seem to get the same result if we start from the idea of *having all you need*. Because we're assuming the highest good implies having all you need. And by 'having all you need' I don't mean just for yourself, living a lonesome life. I mean for your parents as well, and your wife and children and all the people you care about, and your fellow citizens — because human beings are naturally social animals. (Then again, we'd have to set some kind of limit. If you stretch it to include grandparents and grandchildren and your friends' friends and so on it'll go on forever. We'll look into that question later.) For now we'll define 'all-you-need' like this: it's enough on its own to make life desirable and such that *nothing is missing*. And we assume that that's exactly what the ideal life is like. Also, such a life is the most desirable of all good things, but can't be *combined with* other good things. If it could, then obviously it would be even more desirable if you added even the smallest extra good thing to it. The addition would mean you had a greater total of good things than before; and a greater set of good things has to be more desirable.

So here are our conclusions: The ideal life is an ultimate goal; it implies having all you need; and it's the goal of all human action.

To say that the highest good is 'an ideal life' seems like stating the obvious. We need a clearer account of what that actually means. We might be able to do that if we could first get some idea of the *function* of a human being:

For a flute-player or a sculptor or any artist, or anyone with a function or specific activity, *their* highest good, and their doing well or badly, depends on their function. That's probably how it is for human beings, too — if there's a *human* function. And shouldn't there be? Could it be that carpenters and shoemakers have functions and activities, but not human beings? Could we really be born functionless? Naturally idle? Surely if eyes and hands and feet and every other part of the body has a clear function, we can we assume human beings similarly have an overall function, beyond the functions of all the parts? So, what could that function be? Mere *life* is common even to plants, and we're trying to find something particular to human beings. So we can rule out a life based around just growing and reproducing. What's next? Some sort of perception-based life? But perception is obviously something common to horses and cows and every other animal. So that leaves us with the life of the rational part of us: a life of agency. ('Rational' means both the part *obedient* to reason, as well as the part that has it and does the thinking.) And since the term 'life' here is ambiguous [it can refer either to merely having, or to exercising, our capacities] we have to add that we mean a life of *actively exercising* our capacities. That seems the more natural meaning of 'life'. So the human function is: the *exercise of the rational and partly rational capacities of the soul*. But there's more. We also say that a given thing X and a *good* X — e.g., a guitar player and a *good* guitar player — have basically the same function. That applies quite generally, and in each case the extra element of being a *good* X should be tacked on to the function: the function of a guitar player is to play the guitar, and of a *good* guitar player, to play the guitar *well*. So let's suppose that's right. We're now saying (a) that the human function is to live a certain kind of life: a life of exercising the soul and of rational agency; and (b) that the function of a *good* man to do those things *well* and *rightly*; and (c) that the function of any X is performed well by being done consistently with its *being a good X*. So it follows that the highest good for human beings is: *the exercising of the soul, consistent with being good* — and if there are different senses of 'being good', then *consistent with the best and most complete form of being good*. Plus, *over a full lifetime*. Because one swallow doesn't make a summer, nor does a single day, and likewise a single day or a short span of time isn't enough to make a man blessed, or to make an ideal life.

There — that's good enough as an outline of the highest good. In any case, we should probably do a rough sketch first, and fill in the full picture later. Presumably its up to every philosopher, not just me, to move things forward, and add detail to the parts of the sketch that are well drawn. Time is also good at working out these kinds of things — time's a good co-worker. That's how progress has been made in technology as well: each generation adds something, and fills in more of the gaps.

We also have to remember what we said earlier on, and not demand the same kind of precision absolutely all the time. In each field we've got to adapt to the subject matter, and only look for the degree of precision that suits that branch of philosophy. You know how carpenters and a mathematician have different ways of looking for straight lines: the carpenter only needs a straight line to be straight *enough* for the job; the mathematician tries to define it exactly, and figure out its properties, because he's looking at absolute truth. Well, that kind of *as-much-as-we-need* approach is the one we should use in all other areas as well. We don't want the minor details to become more important than the main task.

We also shouldn't demand explanations in the same way in every case. Sometimes its good enough just to state clearly that something *is the case* — that's how it works with our starting points, for example. Basic facts come first, and are our starting points, our principles. In some cases we become aware of them by grasping generalizations, in other cases by perception, in some cases by a kind of habit-forming: in different ways for different principles. We have to try to approach each class according to their nature, and we have to make a special effort to set them out really well, because they make such a huge impact on what follows. I'd say that having the right starting point in ethics is more than half of the whole job. Lots of the other things that we're trying to work out become clear the moment we have the right principles.

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But we have to look into this not just on the basis of our conclusion and the arguments that got us there, but also by looking at what other people typically say about it. All the available evidence should chime in with our claims, if they're right. If they're wrong, the truth will throw up objections pretty fast.

So, first of all, good things are divided into three groups — there are the ones we call 'external' goods, there are goods of the soul, and goods of the body. And of those three groups we standardly treat goods *of the soul* as good things in the strictest and fullest sense. And we can classify rational action

and activity of the soul as goods of the soul. So our definition seems to fit nicely with that very long-standing view, widely agreed on by philosophers.[1]

Also, the idea that an ideal life means 'doing well' and 'living well' fits nicely with our view, because we've pretty much defined it as a state of living and acting well.

The way we've defined it, it also seems to have all the features that people standardly look for, *viz*, some people think it's a life of *being good* (or being wise, or having some kind of knowledge) others think that it's those things (or one them) plus *pleasure*, or at least not devoid of pleasure, others bring in *external prosperity* as well. Some of these are popular, traditional views, some are held by a small number of well-known thinkers; and it's not very plausible that both groups are totally off target. They've probably got it right in at least some respects — perhaps even in most respects.

So, first, my definition agrees with people who identify the ideal life with being a good man or being good in some way, seeing as activity of the soul *consistent with being good* is obviously tied to being good. But the qualification matters: it makes quite a big difference whether we take the ultimate good to lie in *possessing* good qualities or *using* them — in a disposition or an activity. After all, the disposition can be there and have no effect at all, as in the case of a man who's asleep or otherwise totally inactive. But with the *activity* that's impossible, because it necessarily implies that you'll be *doing* things, and doing well. It's like the way that, at the Olympic games, it isn't simply the finest and the strongest athletes who win the prizes; it's the ones who *take part in the competition* — people who take part have some chance of winning. Likewise, in life, *being* a fine and decent man is not enough. It's people who *act*, and *do* things right, who attain the prize.

And their life is also *pleasurable* in itself. That's because and each of us gets pleasure — which is a psychological thing — from the things we value. If you like horses, then you get pleasure from horses; and if you like sightseeing, then you get pleasure from seeing sights. And by the same token, if you like doing what's right, that means doing the right thing is pleasurable for you, and in general, ethical actions are pleasurable if you like being a good man. Now most people, it's true, fight against their pleasures, because they take pleasure in things that aren't naturally pleasurable. But people who love

[1] The next sentence reads: 'It's right that the goal of life should be a matter of action and exercising of capacities, because that way it become something to do with the soul, rather than an external good.' This closely repeats, in a shorter form, the previous point, and is probably an alternative version of that point.

what's honourable take pleasure in things that *are* naturally pleasurable. That's just what ethical actions are like: naturally pleasurable. That's to say, they're pleasurable not just *for those people*, but *intrinsically*. So their life doesn't need any extra pleasure as a sort of icing on the cake; it has its pleasure in itself. After all, here's another thing: a person who doesn't *enjoy* acting honourably isn't really a good man in the first place, is he? You wouldn't call a person fair if they didn't *enjoy* acting fairly, or generous if they didn't *enjoy* acting generously, and likewise for the rest. But in that case, ethical actions must be intrinsically enjoyable. And of course they're also good for you, and honourable. In fact, they're *more* enjoyable, honourable, and good for you than anything else, if good people are right about them — and we said that they are. So it turns out that the ideal life is simultaneously the *best* thing for you, the most *honourable*, and the most *pleasurable*, and those three aspects of life don't come apart after all, the way that famous poem on the temple at Delos says they do:

> The most *honourable* thing? To do what's right.
> What's *best?* To be alive and healthy.
> The *greatest pleasure*? To get what you desire.

I say that in reality all these things coincide in the best kinds of activity, and it's those, or the best of them, that I say constitute an ideal life.

But as we said, it seems that an ideal life needs external goods as well. After all, it's impossible, or at any rate not easy, to do honourable things without material resources. There are lots of things that we do by using our friends or our wealth or political power as our tools, so to speak. And there are some things that take the shine off one's life if you don't have them, like a good family, good children, or physical beauty. If you're hideously ugly, or from a lowly background, or single and childless, you're not very likely to be living an ideal life, and perhaps even less if you have really horrible children or friends, or if you have good children or friends who die young. So as we said, an ideal life seems to need this sort of external prosperity as well. That's why some people even identify the ideal life with being *lucky*, while others say that it's a matter of being <lucky while also being> a good man.[2]

[2] I prefer to read: ὅθεν εἰς ταὐτὸ τάττουσιν ἔνιοι τὴν εὐτυχίαν τῇ εὐδαιμονίᾳ, ἕτεροι δὲ ⟨ταυτὴν μετ'⟩ ἀρετῆς. Unemended the text says (rather lamely): 'while others say that it's a matter of being a good man.'

That gives rise to another question: how exactly do we attain an ideal life? Through learning, or by habituation or some other sort of training? Or does it come as a kind of gift from god, or just through dumb luck? If there's anything that god gives to human beings, it would make sense that an ideal life should be something god-given, perhaps even the most god-given thing of all, seeing as it's the best thing that human beings can attain. This is a question we should perhaps leave to a different area of philosophy; but even if it's *not* a godsend, and just comes from being a good man and from some kind of learning or training, we certainly tend to think of it as pre-eminently god-related. That's because we tend to feel that the *reward for being a good man* is not only the highest good but also some kind of blessing from god.

On my view, it also turns out to be something lots of people can have. Unless some innate handicap makes you *incapable* of being good, you can attain the ideal life through learning and by your own efforts. And if things seems better that way, rather than it being down to luck, then it's likely that things *are* that way, given that natural systems are always set up in the best way possible — much like the products of design or any other [purposeful] cause, only much more so, since nature is the best designer of all. To have the most important and finest thing of all depending on luck would be totally incongruous.

The definition itself helps us see what we're looking for [i.e., that it isn't a matter of luck]. We defined it as a kind of 'activity of the soul, consistent with being good.' All those other things are just the background requirements, or things that help with the task or that we use for it — mere tools.

This also seems to agree with what we said at the start. We decided that the highest good was the same thing as the goal of the statesman; and statesmanship is mostly concerned with turning citizens into certain kinds of people — *good* people, who can be relied on to behave ethically.

That also explains why we don't say that a cow or a horse or any other animal can live an ideal life — because they're just not capable of that kind of activity. For the same reason children can't be living an ideal life either, because they're still too young to be able to do those kinds of things. When we call children 'blessed' we just mean they have a rosy future. Because what's required, as we said, is *a complete life* of being good in the most complete way. Life is full of sudden changes, and all sorts of strokes of good and bad luck, and even the most prosperous people can suffer terrible disasters before the end, like Priam in the *Iliad*; and if someone experiences that kind of

misfortune and ends his life miserably, no one would say they lived an ideal life.

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So does that mean that we should never declare someone's life ideal while he's still alive? Do we have to 'wait and see how it ends', as Solon said? And suppose we agree to that, does that mean the man *is* living an ideal life *once he's dead*? Or is that just totally silly? — especially if we're saying that the ideal life is one of activity. But even if we don't mean that the *dead* person is living an ideal life, and what Solon actually means is that we can only safely say, retrospectively, that a man's life *was* ideal once he's beyond the reach of suffering and misfortunes, even that's something we might well want to disagree with. After all, it seems that good things and bad things *can* still happen to people after they're dead — just as they can happen to people who are alive but totally unaware of them — things like posthumous honour and disgrace, or the successes and misfortunes of their children and grandchildren. But then that raises another puzzle. Imagine a man has lived a perfect life, right up to old age, and died a perfect death. The fortunes of his descendants might then keep shifting back and forth; and some of them might be good people, and attain the life they deserve, others the opposite; and obviously they can be related to him by any number of generations. It would be very odd he kept flip-flopping back and forth along with them, even though he's dead, so that one day we say he lived an ideal life, and the next day we say he was a miserable failure. But it would also be odd if the fortunes of descendants didn't have *any* impact at all on their ancestors, not even for a short while.

We'd better to go back to our first puzzle. That one might help see the answer to the one we're looking at now. So, suppose we do have to 'wait and see how it ends' and suppose we can only say, *retrospectively,* that a man's life *was* ideal. Surely it's absurd if when his life *is* ideal we're not allowed to say so, because we don't want to make that claim about anyone while they're still alive, because their luck might change — and we've assumed that an ideal life should be stable, not liable to sudden change, and fortunes can often undergo dramatic turnarounds. Clearly, if we stayed focused on a man's fortunes, we'd be saying that his life is ideal one moment, and wretched the next, and the ideal life would turn out to be something that changes quicker than a chameleon, and has a very weak foundation. Maybe we shouldn't be focusing on strokes of luck at all. Surely whether your life is goes well or badly *doesn't* depend on luck. Human life, as we said, may well need good

fortune as an *extra*, but what *mostly* makes a life ideal are the *activities that go with being a good man*, and the opposite sort make your life go badly.

This particular puzzle that we've just considered supports our earlier definition of the ideal life. Because there's no human function that has as much *stability* as the activities connected with being good. Ethical qualities are even more stable than scientific knowledge, and of the various ethical qualities, the ones we prize the most are the most stable of all, because they're the ones that people exercise the most, and the most continuously, all through their lives. That's probably the reason why we don't forget them. So the man whose life is ideal life will have the characteristic we were looking for: he'll be that way *throughout his life*. Because he'll *always*, or most of all, be exercising his ethical and his intellectual qualities. As for misfortunes, he'll always deal with them as honourably as possible, and appropriately in every respect — at least if he's 'truly good, perfect, without flaw'.

Lots of things in life happen by chance, varying in their importance, and out of those the minor pieces of good or bad luck clearly won't have much impact on your life one way or the other, but a large number of major pieces of good fortune are an extra blessing (because they're a natural adornment of life in themselves, and because you can make use of them ethically and honourably) while major *mis*fortunes may scuff and mar life's perfection, because they cause distress, and get in the way of all sorts of good activities. But even in the midst of disasters honourable behaviour can shine through — if you handle a series of terrible misfortunes calmly, not because they don't hurt, but with nobility, and dignity. And if exercising ethical qualities like that is the key thing in life, as we said, then an ideal life *can't* be overthrown altogether, because a good man will *never* do things that are ethically despicable, or shabby. If a man is truly good, then we expect him to handle every misfortune in a dignified way and always do the most honourable thing that his circumstances allow, just as a good general will make the most effective use whatever troops he has available, and a shoemaker will make the finest shoes he has from whatever bits of leather he's given, and likewise for other experts. And if that's the case, then a man whose life is truly ideal can *never* become totally wretched; though his life won't be exactly blissful either, if he suffers misfortunes on the scale of king Priam's.