

Parnassus House
February 24, 2026

Nicomachean Ethics, Book 1, Chapters 1–5

Aristotle was a philosopher who lived in and around Greece in the fourth century, B.C. Famously, he was the student of Plato, and the teacher of Alexander the Great. There is good reason to believe that Aristotle wrote the *Nicomachean Ethics* for his son, Nicomachus.

In the *Ethics*, Aristotle takes up the question of the good human life. Book I introduces many of the concepts that are key to his inquiry: the good, happiness, and virtue, to name only a few.

1. The fact that we have to undertake this inquiry in the first place – that we have to ask the question, what is the human good? – is a *problem*. Humans are beings with a *need to know what is good*. Not knowing can be painful and disorienting.
2. However, it seems that finding such knowledge is *difficult*. Aristotle does not offer a short and simple answer to the question of the good life. Rather, in Book I he sets off in a direction, takes detours, and has to continually return to the question at hand.
3. Aristotle's opening line argues that human beings can't help but be *purposive*. All of our efforts inevitably *aim* at some *purpose*, which he calls "some good."
4. The claim that every human effort aims at some good does *not* imply that that these goods are necessarily *moral*. Becoming wealthy, for example, may be the object of someone's aim, quite apart from the moral status of money-making.
5. Furthermore, it's very often the case that we have not thoroughly examined, or perhaps even become aware of, the good at which we are aiming. Aristotle is going to try to help us become more fully conscious of the objects of our aims.
6. Many goods we pursue are influenced by our *political regime*. Aristotle calls the political art the "architectonic" art, meaning the one that supervenes over all others. Because the regime needs people to carry out particular kinds of work in a division of labor that supports the political community (agricultural work, manufacturing work, military work, educational work, &c.) our proximate day-to-day goals tend to come to us, more or less indirectly, from the controlling influence of our regime.
7. Aristotle reasons that some goods are ministerial to higher goods, while some other good (or goods) may be intrinsically choiceworthy. Ministerial goods are *means* to some other *end*. Furthermore, if there is no *highest end*, or *best good*, then life appears to be a *meaningless* meander. Aristotle wants us to take seriously the possibility of a highest good because, if it exists, it must be the most important knowledge one could have.
8. The highest good Aristotle identifies is *happiness*. Everyone agrees that living well is the same thing as being happy. But people disagree on what happiness *is*. Some say that the happy life is the life of *pleasure*. Others that it is the life of *honor*, which points toward a life of *virtue*. Others still, moneymaking. For various reasons, none of these common opinions seem to satisfy our longing for a perfect and complete highest end.