

Parnassus House

March 3, 2026

*Nicomachean Ethics, Book 1, Chapters 7–13*

Throughout Book 1, Aristotle guides his readers to examine the field of human goods, and the prospects for achieving happiness. If every human action is inevitably aimed at some *purpose*, and if there is a *highest good* that could make human life meaningful, then discovering the content of the good life requires us to clarify two things: (1) the character of our longings for the highest good, and (2) the class of activity most fitting for the class of human beings.

1. In 1.7 Aristotle posits that the best human good – the one that would truly satisfy our wishes – would have to be *complete*. There are many goods that are incomplete, such as health, victory, and housing. But these are instrumental, or chosen “on account of something else.” The complete human good would have to be chosen *for its own sake*. It would be good *without reference* to some other good.
2. Furthermore, the complete good would have to be *self-sufficient*. By self-sufficient, Aristotle seems to have in mind a quality of *independence* or *invulnerability*. Human beings long for a way of living that suffices to make life happy without depending on events outside our determination. We can think of the human proclivity to believe in *karma* as an example of this longing because such beliefs express our wish for good deeds to be rewarded – if not directly, then somehow indirectly in the cosmic view.
3. Aristotle is careful to clarify that self-sufficiency does not imply solitary individualism. Whatever this best good is, it must harmonize with the *political* situation within which human life transpires. Human beings have a proclivity for political patterns of living, i.e. for living in cities, under political regimes, and within a division of labor.
4. Within political life, excellence resides in doing *work*. (The word translated “work” here is *ergon*, which might also be translated as “function” or an “action” involving effort.) An expert in a particular field of work is the one who performs his art *excellently*. Perhaps the best *human life* would be characterized by doing a kind of *human work* excellently. But there are several fields of expertise, and no particular one seems to suffice for *all* human beings. Aristotle asks, what could be the *work* of a human being, *as such*?
5. Aristotle reasons that the work of human beings should pertain to human capacities. Whereas living is common to plants, animals, and humans; and sense perception is common to animals and humans; it seems that only human beings possess *reason*. Therefore, Aristotle *conditionally* suggests that the work of a human being is a way of life, involving reason, and characterized by “an activity of soul in accord with virtue.”
6. In 1.8–1.11, Aristotle deals with the difficult fact that death and misfortune cast shadows over our wishes for the happy life. Human beings need *equipment* to achieve noble deeds. While Aristotle is realistic about the apparent need for “external prosperity,” such as friends, wealth, beauty, and political power, he maintains the possibility that a life of virtuous activity could allow one to nobly bear up under a variety of circumstances.