

ARISTOTLE (384–322 BCE)

Aristotle was born at Stagira, a Greek colony of Thrace. He became a member of Plato's Academy in 367 BCE. It is said that he expected to be made head of the Academy when **Plato** died. Disappointed in this expectation, he left Athens. After three rather mysterious but decisively formative years spent in the court of Hermias at Assos, in 343 BCE he accepted a post at the court of Philip of Macedon, as tutor to the future Alexander the Great. He returned to Athens in 335 BCE and opened his own school, the Lyceum. His connection with Alexander made him unpopular with Athenian patriots after Alexander's death in 323 BCE, and he again left the city. He died at Chalcis in Euboea. Of his numerous philosophical, logical and scientific works, the ones directly of interest to us are the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*. Like nearly all his extant works, these were posthumously assembled from literary remains by his family and students (the Nicomachus of the *Nicomachean Ethics* was Aristotle's son). This fact has given rise to serious textual complications.

The naturalness, and therefore the rightness, of political life is a constant theme of Aristotle's political and ethical writing. 'Man is *by nature* a political animal. Whoever is outside the state is either greater than human or less than human' (*Politics* 1:2). The state – the *polis* – is, he thinks, the only setting within which human beings can live the sort of lives appropriate to their kind. Aristotle's *Politics* is devoted to a technical analysis of the ways in which states can be organised. The ethical presuppositions that inform this analysis are mostly found in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Aristotle's general view of the world is of the kind known as *teleological*. Everything in the universe has a *telos* – an 'end' or 'purpose' – peculiar to itself. By this, Aristotle does not mean that everything has a 'purpose' in the way that it is the purpose of a knife to cut or a pen to write. Things which are not artefacts, which have not been made to do something, have *teloi* in the sense of having a state of full or final development towards which it is their nature to unfold. The *telos* of an acorn is to become an oak tree. The process whereby it does so is its *ergon*, its work or task. The natural capacity it has for engaging in and completing this process is its *dynamis*. Finally, what we mean when we call a thing 'good' is that it has achieved its *telos* successfully. A good pen is a pen that writes well, a good oak tree is a fully grown specimen, and so on.

What is the *telos*, and hence the good, of man? It is, Aristotle says, the achievement of a state of *eudaimonia*. The customary translation of *eudaimonia* is 'happiness', but 'happiness' means less than Aristotle does

by *eudaimonia*. For Aristotle, the word denotes a lifelong state of active ethical well-being considered as the goal of human activity. How do we know that 'happiness' is man's 'end' in this sense? We know it because we know both that we desire happiness and that we do not desire it for the sake of anything else. If someone asks why we want money or power, we might say that we want them because they will make us happy. But if anyone asks why we want to be happy, we do not reply in terms of some objective lying beyond happiness. Happiness is the 'end' in the uncomplicated sense of there being no further desideratum to which it is a means. Moreover, happiness is only properly such when it is continued or continuous throughout life. Happiness cannot be something evanescent or trivial. We cannot really say that a man's life has been 'happy' until it is over, since only then can it be reviewed in its entirety.

By what means, then, are we to accomplish this end, and hence this good? It is, Aristotle thinks, only by identifying some mode of activity in which no other creature is equipped to engage that we can identify a *telos* peculiar to human beings. We need, therefore, to find a capacity, a *dynamis*, that we and only we have. This *dynamis* cannot consist merely in the processes of living, for plants are alive; nor can it consist in being alive and sentient, for then we should have no *telos* separate from that of the beasts. It must, Aristotle concludes, have to do with *reason*, the capacity, which no other creature has, to engage in connected and purposive thought. And it must lie in the use rather than the possession of reason: musicians are not musicians because they own, but because they play, their instruments. Again, it cannot lie in the *mere* use of reason: someone is a good harpist not because they play the harp, but because they play it well. We shall not, therefore, call someone a good man unless he uses his reason well: unless he uses it 'according to virtue'. The 'point' of human life is to achieve 'happiness' through rational activity according to virtue. This is the 'end' prescribed for us by our nature.

Aristotle uses the word 'virtue' to mean two different but related things. He speaks of moral virtues, which are virtues in the usual sense, and *dianoetic* or intellectual virtues, of which two are of interest to us: *sophia* and *phronesis*. Difficulties inherent in the texts as they have been transmitted to us sometimes make Aristotle's meaning less than obvious, but he seems to think that happiness is associated in different ways, or at different levels, with the deployment of both types of virtue. On the one hand, happiness in the fullest sense lies in the contemplation of abstract ideas and their logical relations. Such activity requires the deployment of the intellectual virtue called *sophia*: 'theoretical' or 'demonstrative' wisdom. Demonstrative reasoning has no practical outcome. It is the activity of philosophical thought pure and simple, divested of any