Modernizing Aristotle's Ethics

Toward a New Art and Science of Self-Actualization

By

Roger E. Bissell and **Vinay Kolhatkar**

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Dedication

We dedicate this labor of love to the spirit of Aristotle and to the many thinkers, in philosophy, the natural sciences, and the humanities, who have kept that spirit alive with their noble and worthy efforts. We thank them for lending us their shoulders on which to stand and see things others may have not seen in the same way we have.

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Foreword

We all write today from under the rubble. We are three and a half years following the unleashing of an attack on reason, liberty, and individual autonomy on a scale we've never seen in the modern age. There were forced business closures, travel restrictions, and mandated face coverings, followed by forced medical injections. Every step was justified in the name of science that was very much in dispute, but the dissenters were censored by digital platforms on order from government. It was done to us by authority: government, media, corporate, and academic elite.

The truth of all of this is so painful for many that we aren't really talking about it. There have been no serious apologies, no real reckoning, no full accounting of the victims, and no genuine promises on the part of those in power never to do this again.

All of this should be a lesson to us that should help illuminate tragedies from the past. There are times when mass irrationality backed by power becomes fully capable of wiping out even the most settled principles of law and reversing the progress of centuries. Humankind animated by superstitious delusions—in this case, that government can be the master of the microbial kingdom with enough power and public-service announcements—is capable of unthinkable amounts of harm.

What is true now was also true in the ancient world, when science and logic had a low standing but still inspired Aristotle to research and write with a passion for discovering truth about the world, both in its natural and social elements. His writings disappeared from the Western mind for centuries following the fall of Rome and re-emerged in the Middle Ages to inspire many generations of other intellectuals and eventually pave the way for the Enlightenment, the unfolding and expansion of the idea of human rights, and a new primacy attached to the concepts of reason and freedom.

Clearly, this is a time for the rediscovery of the Aristotelian ethos, improved upon for modern times. Above all, what motivated Aristotle's search for truth was a grounding in what is real. If that sounds obvious, it is not so much actually, either in his time or ours. The human imagination is capable of entertaining astonishing illusions based on mythical mental models and

then acting on them without regard to the consequences. This is precisely what the Aristotelian seeks to avoid, replacing that with a reality-based paradigm that builds logical systems for thinking and empirical methods for discovery.

These are the themes explored in this tremendous collection of essays that seek together to revive this tradition of thought and apply it in new ways, particularly through the prescient vision of one of the 20th century's most notable practitioners, namely, Ayn Rand. It is impossible for anyone who has read her work not to look around the world today and see the unfolding of themes from her fiction and nonfiction all around us. The characters from *Atlas Shrugged*, once criticized for being too one-dimensional, are all around us, too, and causing havoc in the real world just as they did in her fictional and prophetic work.

It makes sense, then, to consult those who have learned from this strain of thought and are doing the hard intellectual work to understand and improve our world. *Modernizing Aristotle's Ethics* truly offers hope that not all is lost, and that the intellectual ethos of the social order can be rebuilt from under this rubble. In any case, the effort is a mighty one based on genuine confidence in human reason and the potential impact of good ideas on the world in which we live.

Jeffrey Tucker, President
Brownstone Institute
August 2023

Preface

Man is the best of the animals when perfected, [but] he is
the worst of all when sundered from law and justice.

—Aristotle[1]

We could all quote incidents from our lives that attest to the best and worst of humans. And expanding our search into human history would give us more extreme data points.

Has Nature itself commanded that such a diversity in human nature must exist? Or are some of us molded into the worst by wrongheaded ideologies, poor choices, and misfortune? If, indeed, it is possible to uncover the best within us, what's the blueprint for such an undertaking?

Both of us had been grappling with these questions for our entire adult lives without coming close to uncovering the treasure of such a blueprint—a map that not only revealed the path to uncover the best in us but also the theoretical cobblestones that held it in place.

In our quest, we found that there were four fields, each with an extensive literature on how we should lead our lives: philosophy, religion, the humanities, and the self-help genre. But as we got closer to the answer we were looking for, we found that it lay in philosophy, in an approach and method that Aristotle pioneered. Yet, we also found that Aristotle's ethics itself was incomplete and wanting in practical guidance that could be applied across all spheres of modern life.

We found more answers—visionary theories in the works of Aristotle's philosophic followers, and crucial insights in the empiricism of the sciences that sought to explain the nature of human beings. But the new sciences were purely empirical, providing scant attention to integrating their findings with a fundamental view of the world and its possibilities. Without an essential foundation in metaphysics, the new sciences—neuroscience and the humanities, including psychology and economics—had no theoretical basis for the how or the why of ethical truth, let alone for establishing that they have found it, and that it is so. Indeed, some of them have found ethical truth, but their testable hypotheses do not rest on a meta-ethical

framework. In that sense, their claims are no better, no more secure, than those arrived at through the purportedly less rigorous methods of self-help genre writers, even though the cumulative results from each group did provide a wealth of data for any theoretical claims of how ethics must be.

"It works" is not good enough for so vital an undertaking. One must have a testable model for why it works—a comprehensive theory of human nature. The need for a new integration beckoned.

It was in 2021 that we met and discussed our respective findings, theories, and knowledge gaps. We were pleasantly surprised to find ourselves so close on a wide variety of related issues. And there, the idea for this book was born.

A book that would do a brisk and selective traverse of 2,300 years of Aristotelian ethical thought, establish a metaphysical foundation that is valid and true, and lay upon it, brick by validated brick, the knowledge that the new sciences have been bringing forward.

The journeys of a lifetime were getting closer to their first breakthrough.

Our "brisk and selective traverse" of Aristotelian ethical thought was not meant to be, and isn't, a thorough exposition of Aristotle's ethics, let alone of his whole philosophy. Even less is it a commentary on all Aristotelian thought; we present only a brief summary of the salient ideas of the major Aristotelians. Our key take from Aristotle is very selective. We have availed ourselves of those parts of his metaphysics and his ethical methodology that allow for an iterative interplay between empirical observations and reflective thought, with the aim of bringing about a merger between science and philosophy and crafting a fact-based teleological ethic.

To that end, we found that our passions—Roger's in philosophic thought, and Vinay's in the scientific basis of ethical thought—complemented each other. But there was an added blessing to this partnership.

Authors often write in a lonely vacuum, their minds gyrating from self-doubt to overconfidence, both in regard to their perspective and to their ability to express it well for readers. For this reason, the "ideal coauthor" can be a priceless gift.

First, a coauthor who broadly shares one's worldview is a psychological blessing—a mirror that erases self-doubt by reflecting one's better side, yet also a critic that challenges one's convictions held as truisms, drawing a hard line between well-founded assurance and unwarranted audacity. This was certainly the case for us.

Also, as the reader may imagine, we took turns at playing devil's advocate and at editing and supplementing what the other wrote. Such synergy can provide an invaluable boost to one's productivity and confidence, as it did for us.

As a result, the lonely vacuums gave way to an assured audacity and unity of purpose as each of us strove to be an "ideal coauthor," taking turns to help better the thinker and the author in the other.

That journey in itself was reward enough. But now, lanterns in hand, we must descend into the caves of enlightenment with our readers in tow. Before we begin to retrace our trek to this new integration, however, we must acknowledge firstly, those whose torches brightened some dark corners in the caves, and secondly, those who added enthusiasm to the flame of curiosity that was already burning within us.

Among the former, we want to acknowledge Chris Matthew Sciabarra, Douglas B. Rasmussen, and Douglas J. Den Uyl, neo-Aristotelians all, who have innovated some powerful analytical frameworks which we used in our own analyses. Also, Robert Campbell and Carrie-Anne Biondi, who provided insightful guidance and welcome critiques of our sample chapters.

Among the latter, Vinay would like to thank the husband-and-wife team of John Yokela and Brishon Martin, with whom he had numerous discussions between 2015 and 2018 on the subject of ethics, particularly the ethics of Ayn Rand; and Roger wants to express his gratitude to his wife, Becky, for the numerous hours they spent together reading and discussing the manuscript. Also, we would like to thank Donna Paris, the eagle-eyed editor of The Savvy Street, and journalist Marco den Ouden, both of whom read some chapters of our manuscript, suggested insightful edits, and provided the much-needed nutrition for our souls with their complimentary and insightful feedback.

Professor Edward Younkins deserves a special thank you for his vigorous vote of confidence in our abilities and enthusiastic support for our project from the moment it was conceived.

Finally, many thanks to Sarah Palmer and Ben Williams, publishers at the Ethics International Press, who have been a constant source of clarity and encouragement—and to Jeffrey Tucker, President of the Brownstone Institute, who kindly agreed to write the Foreword to this book.

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Notes

[1] See Aristotle [c. 336–323 BC] i, 1253a.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Crafting a Meaningful, Humane Life

Roger E. Bissell and Vinay Kolhatkar

What about the world around us,
How can we fail to see…
And if we look behind us, there's a wind blowing in
To create the age of reason
If we consider carefully, the options put before us
So much wisdom, so much love, so much waiting for us
And if we look ahead there's the sun and the seasons
Another day, another age of reason

—Johanna Pigott and Todd Hunter, 1988[1]

One "age of reason" is past us. But there is unquestionably, as the lyrics say, so much wisdom awaiting us, that the possibility of yet another Age of Reason seems plausible—one even finer than the first one which exalted the natural sciences to a position of challenging religion as the primary explicators and shapers of the world around us.

But, as the song's chorus asks, "What about the world around us?"

Today, the world is still beset by poverty and pillage, and, even amongst the well-off and the young and healthy, depression and despair. We do need a new age of reason, one which makes the humanities genuine fields of reason. We also need a philosophy that integrates them into the exalted edifices that, in the previous Age of Reason, the natural sciences built and then proudly occupied.

The Scientific Revolution (16th and 17th century) had a dramatic success in explaining "the world around us," because the natural world obeys certain laws, and the scientific method was available to help us tease them out. The technological inventions and innovations that these discoveries enabled

were so many and so efficacious that science acquired a lofty position in the human world, comparable to that of the divine. Indeed, in an epitaph written for one of the greatest figures of the Scientific Revolution, Sir Isaac Newton, the poet Alexander Pope said (1735):

> Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night
> God said, Let Newton be! And all was light.

The natural sciences exclusively used reason, the faculty by which humans understand the world and improve their own condition.

But the Age of Reason (18th century) succeeded (rather than coincided with) the triumph of the natural sciences—with the notion that reason could also help us understand ourselves, our origins, and even the way we ought to conduct our lives and our societies—a serious challenge to the dominance of religion in these spheres.

Yet, the power of reason was first unleashed in Ancient Greece, and most preeminently, with Aristotle. Nothing in the Scientific Revolution contradicted an Aristotelian worldview; indeed, it confirmed the basics of his metaphysics.

Another field in which Aristotle and the others of his era commenced a serious enquiry was ethics—crucial questions such as what is a good life? How should we live? What is virtue? How can we uncover the best within us? What can make us happy? And most crucially, can virtuous action make us happy?

The Greek philosophers had already realized that if we are to become the best persons that we can be, if we are to actualize ourselves and to live well, both as individuals and as living among others, we need more than just snap decisions based on impulses or appealing, free-floating maxims with no apparent foundation. We need *a coherent framework*—firm, stable, practical guidelines connected to and developed from a correct knowledge of human nature and a valid perspective of the world.

To put it simply, in order to have a solid basis for our ethics, as well as, crucially, our politics, we need good science integrated with good philosophy. That is precisely what we received, over 2,300 years ago,

from our forebears, the Ancient Greeks—a priceless gift that has lifted us, and continues to lift us higher and higher, above the limitations of primitive life.

True, those Greeks of long ago didn't discover fire or how to domesticate animals or even the Pythagorean equation, and they didn't invent language or art or the wheel. Technology and culture have been a long and continuing part of humanity's long ascent from the plains of Africa and the caves of Europe.

But what they did for us was even more important than the scientific and technological leaps. For one thing, they showed us how to grapple with the "Big Questions"—questions about ourselves, our lives, and the world we live in:

- What is the nature of this world and the things in it? How do things change, and why?
- Who are we? What is our nature? Why are we here?
- What is a good life? How should we lead our life? How should we treat others?
- Can we know the answers to these questions—and if so, how?

It is also from the Ancient Greeks that we learned how to build on these answers and how to develop a systematized body of knowledge by applying reason and logic to our observations. The practical importance to human life of such organized study cannot be overstated. But one man in particular deserves the lion's share of the credit.

Over the past 2000-plus years, a lot of water has flowed around the Peloponnesus, but the wellspring for both science and the philosophy that supports it was the deeply fertile and insightful mind of Aristotle. Hegel was not exaggerating when he said in 1840 that Aristotle "was one of the richest and deepest of all the scientific geniuses that have as yet appeared—a man whose like no later age has ever yet produced…[W]ith the revival of the sciences…men went back to the fountainhead, to Aristotle himself." (117, 130)

Meaning no disrespect to other Ancient Greek luminaries such as Socrates, Plato, or Epicurus, we view Aristotle as not only the greatest philosopher who ever lived, but also the one thinker who, more than any other, laid down the most important principles by which science operates. He is rightly thought of as the father of our modern, technological society. Even more, as Ayn Rand stated in 1963, Aristotle is "a philosophical Atlas who carries the whole of Western civilization on his shoulders."

Aristotle was an intellectual titan like no other. Those who have subsequently contributed to the progress of the natural sciences or the humanities have stood on the shoulders of one intellectual giant or another. All of them, however—the contributors and the giants—trace back 2,300 years or so to Aristotle, who (figuratively) stood virtually alone on a blank sheet of papyrus. Aristotle was the intellectual fulcrum of Western civilization, formalizing the laws of logic, inventing what we know today as botany and zoology and aesthetics, and exploring numerous other fields extensively. As noted, his metaphysical worldview was reaffirmed by the immense progress made by the natural sciences in subsequent centuries.

As a consequence, Aristotle has had a lot to do with how good human life has been in modern times—and with how much better the opportunities for self-actualization are now than ever before. We owe him so much. In particular, his logic, dialectics, metaphysics, and philosophy of science provide the framework and methodology that, to this day, support the psychology and ethics of self-actualization, including of course the version we present here. We outline some of the most important components of that foundation in chapter 2.

Although we do not think that Aristotle found the final answers to the burning questions about life and the world, he came close. Nevertheless, he did not have the advantage of two millennia of experience, scientific discovery, philosophic inquiry, and empirical psychology to help him fully refine his thinking. That is an advantage he certainly would have availed himself of, and we feel we should do no less. Clinging uncritically to his ethical ideas in order to avoid a supposed disloyalty would do him a serious disservice. Indeed, that would be a rejection of his own well-considered parting of ways (c. 340) with his illustrious mentor, Plato:

> …it would perhaps be thought to be better, indeed to be our duty, for the sake of maintaining the truth even to destroy what touches us closely, especially as we are philosophers or lovers of wisdom; for, while both are dear, piety requires us to honour truth above our friends. (1096a13–16)

None other than Isaac Newton, arguably the greatest scientist of all time, repeated the sentiment (c. 1644): "Plato is my friend, Aristotle is my friend, but my greatest friend is truth." (88 recto).[2]

Much more recently, this conviction was also well expressed by David L. Norton (1976), who wrote:

> …our objective is not slavish reproduction of the spirit of Hellas but the presentation of a eudaimonism serviceable for today… If our account must go further than theirs, if moreover we find ourselves obliged to rectify what we believe to be certain ancient errors, we may do these things in full confidence that the Greeks, with their esteem of emulation and their scorn of mere imitation, would not have wished it otherwise. (41)

This quest for truth on an Aristotelian foundation has driven intellectual progress across both philosophy and science for more than two millennia. Like Aristotle, some of his followers, both long ago and more recently, have contributed important ideas in each area that support an ethics of flourishing and happiness, and, in chapter 2, we discuss some of the most notable ones.

Also, since Aristotle's time, the natural sciences have split away from philosophy, as have the humanities. Now we can draw upon separate and robust disciplines of biology, neurology, biochemistry, clinical psychology, humanistic psychology, economics, and anthropology—ancillary sciences that can (and should) inform ethics—as well as 2,300 years of human history. All of these tell us important things about human nature and society—the universal and the culture-specific. In chapter 3, we use such noteworthy ideas from biology, anthropology, psychology, and neuroscience that lay a modernized foundation of the essence of human nature—which can be made to work toward generating the best in us.

In chapter 4, we use the much-vindicated Aristotelian metaphysics along with the advances made by one of his followers (Ayn Rand) in sculpting a fundamental perspective of humans in interaction with the world they live in. On that framework, we lay a meta-ethical foundation for a new ethics by applying the essence of human psychological nature theorized in chapter 3, and of human biological and social nature discussed in chapter 4. (The latter was borrowed and extended from Aristotle and another of his followers, Thomas Aquinas.) In the light of all that the ancillary sciences and the post-Aristotelian philosophers have told us about our nature, then, we are confident that there is a good case for modernizing Aristotle as against simply scrapping his ethical ideas and starting afresh. (Or, for that matter, for following his ethics to the letter as though the last 2,300 years had taught us nothing.)

The philosophical skyscraper that Aristotle built stands gloriously tall and upright. It has withstood the test of scientific and philosophic inquiry for over two millennia. Its metaphysical foundations are true and, hence, eternal. But the meta-ethics can be expanded upon, which we have done.

We are not seeking to build a whole new philosophical skyscraper. Instead, the aim of this book is instead to provide a highly practical, "neo-Aristotelian" ethical framework to facilitate human self-actualization (and thereby freedom, flourishing, and happiness). Such a modernized ethics is the focus of chapters 5; it builds on the scientific and philosophical insights from the preceding chapters. It is on this neo-Aristotelian basis that we link ethics (and later, politics) as an "ought" with the philosophy and empirical sciences that provide the "is."

In chapter 5, we look at how our own introspection and passions, our own strengths and weaknesses, and the opportunities and threats in our environment all feed into how we pursue an individualized mission and a set of personal values. In doing so, we have available the universal set of human faculties with which to meet our most pressing human psychological needs from a larger near-universal set, as well as to actualize and perfect ourselves. We are thus able to provide a generalized, universalizable ethic for pursuing a humane, meaningful life, yet one that can be, and must be, individuated in terms of its mission, core values, and self-actualization.

Finally, in chapter 6, building on chapters 3, 4, and 5, and accessing the views of numerous scholars, we extend the universalizable ethics to build a case for a free society that deviates markedly from Aristotle's views on polity (by which we mean a society or state considered as a political unit), yet is consistent with his fundamental view of humankind. The reason for this divergence lies in the fact that certain extraordinary political innovations—the Magna Carta (1215), the sentiments expressed in the U.S. Declaration of Independence from then-imperial England (1776), the drafting of the U.S. Constitution (the 1788 ratification and, subsequently, the 27 amendments so ratified), the U.S. Bill of Rights (the first ten amendments), and an articulated concept of "individual rights" (John Locke and Ayn Rand)—were not accessible to Aristotle by a mere reading of documents.

In departing from Aristotle's view of polity, we fully utilize intellectual advances in political theory since the Magna Carta; and more critically, we learn from the genocidal wreckage of failed ideologies. And "genocidal wreckage" is far from hyperbole. Over the past hundred years, there have been not only spectacular collapses of polities and economies founded on collectivist ideologies, but also two world wars, the second of which was initiated by a murderous despot elected to power.

Despite all that, the world, now in the grip of a new aristocracy, is moving even further away from a free society—abandoning the enlightened scientific and ethical insights of the Age of Reason. This is because of the spectacular rise, over this same period, of an intellectual orthodoxy that has, democratically and peacefully, come to dominate key institutions such as universities, major corporations, public schools, the arts, and even the defense and intelligence agencies. The attendant danger of such a takeover by the forces of unreason and unfreedom is so dire that subsequent generations will be unable to free themselves. Hence, our final chapter (on economy and polity) ends on a note of why we must fight, and more importantly, how we can respond to this new, global threat to the human race and to the billions of individuals "yearning to breathe free."

Yet, to be clear, our thrust throughout the book is quintessentially and wholly Aristotelian: a metaphysics of individual things with real and knowable natures that behave in ways consonant with those natures—and an ethics identifying a set of factually based virtues which, when consistently

practiced, will promote human flourishing and happiness. Our contribution, therefore, will be a *modernized* Aristotelian ethics of self-actualization, of how to lead a humane, meaningful life—one that is based on current scientific knowledge and, moreover, is easier to apply to contemporary human life.

From this, it should be apparent what our project of modernizing Aristotle's ethics is *not*: namely, (1) a thorough, line by line revision of his ethical writings, (2) a restatement of his ethics in modern language, or (3) a reframing of his ethics in terms of modern philosophy (at least, in terms of the various mainstream varieties, which tend to reject the view of humans as having an essential nature and especially built-in teleological ends).

In one important way, then, we are modernizing Aristotle's ethics in that we are beefing up the empirical base of his perspective, by folding in scientific insights from theorists and researchers in various fields of the humanities, including such thinkers as Abraham Maslow. In another way, we are modernizing Aristotle's ethics by adopting and expanding upon the improvements made by various neo-Aristotelians, including most notably Thomas Aquinas (and various Thomists) and Ayn Rand (and various Objectivists). These facets of modernizing Aristotle are covered in chapters 3 and 4.

In yet another way, we are modernizing Aristotle's ethics by shedding those vestiges of ancient ethics that relegated some people (especially women) to second-class status as human beings, and some to outright slavery—while retaining his teleological approach to ethics, which is timelessly true. This we do in chapters 5 and 6, in which we take seriously the injunction that each human should be treated as an end in himself/herself, not a mere means to the ends of others. We find this an ennobling cornerstone for any humane ethics—and for ours in particular.

Most generally, we maintain that the key to updating Aristotle's ethics is to draw upon both a wider, more modern psychological profile of human beings and a deeper, more modern philosophical and scientific understanding of human beings. Just as there is room inside one person's head for understanding both the timelessly human and the particular, contemporary context each of us lives in, so can those of us engaged in the quest

for moral knowledge avail ourselves of the relevant results of the efforts of scientists and philosophers.

We are convinced that such understanding and collaboration will result in a very thorough and helpful guide to human action. More than anything else, that's what we hope to leave with you, our readers: a *practical* guide that, when applied consistently, enables each of you to "know thyself" and thereby lead a flourishing, virtuous life.

However, it should not be thought that we aim at providing a voluminous, detailed manual to guide us in the myriad decisions we face in daily life or long-range planning. Instead, we believe that the good life, the *meaningful, humane* life is one that must be crafted, like a soul-satisfying artwork—albeit a monumental one and one that is best crafted and most satisfying when informed by both the findings of rigorous empirical science and the wisdom of carefully reflective thought. We aim to give readers only the tools, the raw materials, and the visionary blueprint for a rewarding and virtuous life. Each reader must sculpt his or her own life.

In summary, we start with a selective discourse on Aristotle and major neo-Aristotelians (in chapter 2), lay an updated foundation of human nature with the help of the ancillary sciences (in chapter 3), use that to lay a new meta-ethical groundwork (in chapter 4), use that foundation and the groundwork to put forward a new, universalizable, humane ethics (in chapter 5), and then derive a new politics from the new ethics (in chapter 6).

Finally, to our project, too, dear readers, feel free to apply the dictum of Francis Bacon ([1597] 1908), another giant of the Scientific Revolution:

> Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider. (233–4)[3]

Having weighed and considered, if readers agree we have brought the ancillary sciences to bear on philosophy in the right way, and act accordingly, then, indeed, our aspiration of ushering in a new "age of reason" will turn out not to have been a pipe dream. Your coauthors are certainly unwilling to settle for anything less.

Notes

1 These lyrics are from "The Age of Reason," a song written for John Farnham at his request. Lyrics online at: https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/32089739/John+Farnham/Age+of+Reason. Performance video online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kz8mW7vu2BI. See also Adams, 2018.

2 The original Latin reads *Amicus Plato amicus Aristoteles magis amica veritas* which, literally, means: Friend Plato friend Aristotle greatest friend truth. Minus the verbs and adjectives, the meaning still shines through.

3 Bacon continues: "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention" (234). Working in that spirit, we have aspired to craft a book that readers find chewy and digestible—and well worth their diligence and attention.

Chapter 2

A Brief History of Aristotelian Thought

Roger E. Bissell

The natural and proper human end, to which all rational endeavors contribute, Aristotle holds, is a state of rich, ripe, fulfilling earthly happiness.

—Leonard Peikoff, 1991

Aquinas's account of ethical naturalism…is rooted in the works of Aristotle: the foundation in a theory of the human person and the requirement of reason…

—Anthony Lisska, 2003

Aristotle and [Ayn Rand] agree…that man can deal with reality, can achieve values, can live non-tragically…[E]ach upholds man the thinker and therefore man the hero.

—Leonard Peikoff, 1982

I. Aristotle and the Aristotelian Tradition

If you are trying to understand the meaning of life and how to live, where would you go for help? To someone with a well-thought-out system of ideas—or to someone who makes simple, formulaic statements about such issues? If the latter, then you could just read the daily installment of columnist Ann Landers or listen to Dr. Laura's radio program—and then "go do the right thing."

However, if this seems too fragmentary or disjointed, then you would probably feel more secure in seeking guidance from one of the great system-builders in philosophy or the major religions—someone like Aristotle (384–322 BC), a student of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great. Even if he or some other particular philosopher or religious ethicist were

wrong on some issue, just seeing the "Big Picture" in which he frames his ideas would help you to see how everything fits together and whether or not it would be a good idea to follow his lead.

There are, of course, no guarantees that any given system of ideas is true, let alone useful. Moral ideas, especially, need not only a careful examination for internal, Big Picture consistency, but also both a reality check and a road test, as it were. Are they correct—and do they work? Answering these crucial questions is the responsibility of each individual, not something to be brushed aside or taken lightly, let alone to be outsourced to some unquestioned authority, secular or religious.

Like those of the other great system builders in the history of philosophy, including Plato before him and Immanuel Kant after him, Aristotle's ideas have been both reality checked and road tested by countless philosophers and other thinkers. Many have sworn by them, while many others have sworn at them. This is all part of the "marketplace of ideas," fueled by bursts of energetic research and development and animated by fierce brand loyalties and sometimes harsh competition.

Descartes, for instance, was not particularly kind toward Aristotle and his medieval followers (the Scholastics). Nor were many partisans of modern science, who scoffed at Aristotle's *Physics*, mocking his obsolete thoughts, even while tacitly (or even unknowingly) benefiting from the logical methodology that supported their own scientific endeavors, as well as those of several centuries of scientists before them. On the other hand, Leibniz and various other major figures in modern philosophy—including some seemingly unlikely cases, such as Kant, Hegel, and Marx[1]—have praised Aristotle and adopted his ideas, as have contemporary philosophers, psychologists, and philosophers of science, too numerous to mention here.[2]

Despite energetic efforts by Leibniz to broker a détente between his colleagues and Aquinas and the Scholastics, however, the latter were not able to get much traction during the post-Renaissance period of early modern philosophy. They only became a vibrant movement during the 19th century in the form of Neo-Thomism (or Neo-Scholasticism). Since then, happily, their ideas have continued to percolate briskly to the present day.

Thus, there is currently a strong interest in and appreciation of Aristotle's

views across many disciplines, including various branches of philosophy, as well as both the physical and life sciences and psychology. A robust wave of journal and book publication continues in both the Thomist and Aristotelian communities. Aristotelianism, Neo-Aristotelianism, Thomism, and Neo-Thomism are all vying for consideration in the philosophical world.[3] These share the attention-space surrounding Aristotle's thought with yet another ongoing wave of Aristotelian appreciation and scholarship that is centered around the self-consciously secular movement of Objectivism. This wave was begun in the 1950s by novelist-philosopher Ayn Rand and her associates, and contributed to by a large number of other scholars strongly influenced by her thought.[4]

To this day, then, Aristotle's ideas are still alive, still studied, still developed—and still part of the "Great Conversation." Almost as if in answer to Ayn Rand's anguished prayer (1963c) for a "great physician" to save the "dying science of philosophy" (19), reinforcements continue to arrive, from more than one direction and in substantial numbers, including not only generalists and specialists, but also interns and paramedics. If the spirit of Aristotle could channel Mark Twain (or at least, the misquote of him by a biographer), it might say, "Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated." Not only has the "great physician" come through to save the day, but so too have some of his most renowned followers, as well as a number of more recent thinkers and scholars.

As a practical consequence, Aristotle's ideas continue to be applied in various fields of human endeavor and in various ways to help make individual people's lives better. That is our project as well, the results of which we will offer in subsequent chapters, after focusing here more closely on Aristotle's ethics as part of his system of thought, and on its two major conduits between Antiquity and the present day: the Neo-Aristotelian philosophers, Thomas Aquinas and Ayn Rand.[5]

Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–1274), the medieval Christian philosopher and theologian, argued for a natural basis for ethics that closely followed the ideas of Aristotle. More recently, the popular 20th century novelist-philosopher Ayn Rand (1905–1982), acknowledged her philosophical debt to Aristotle and gained worldwide attention for a secular ethics based on human nature. Among Aristotle's many followers and champions, we see

these two as standing out above the rest, particularly in regard to ethics. Before we discuss these two pre-eminent Aristotelian thinkers and their contributions to Aristotle's ethics, however, here is a quick summary of Aristotle's most foundational ideas about the nature of the world in which we live and our ability to understand it. These ideas form the indispensable basis of his life-enhancing ideas in psychology and ethics, which we then briefly sketch in the second section following.

II. An Overview of Aristotle's Thought

At the outset, it is important to note that Aristotle was a *realist* philosopher,[6] in two very important and basic respects. First, he held that this world truly exists, that it consists of real things having real attributes, engaging in real actions, and participating in real relations—that the world and the things in it really *are* and really are *what* they are, which means: they exist and have identity independent of anyone's observing or thinking about them. Second, he held that real knowledge of these things and their features could be gained by sensory perception and conceptual reasoning. These two tenets of his philosophy are technically known as *ontological realism* and *epistemological realism*.

To put it more simply: for Aristotle, there is no appearance-reality dichotomy. We look at the world and we observe things that are so. We see *facts*. When another thinker tried to deny or explain away the obvious, Aristotle calmly and thoroughly shredded all such arguments. In refuting Plato's various non-empirical ideas such as the myth of the Demiurge or the supernatural World of Forms, or the various pre-Socratic claims that there is no change (Parmenides) or no permanence (Heraclitus), Aristotle argued that any notions that fly in the face of our basic observation of reality are wrong and to be dismissed out of hand—which he does, lucidly.[7]

Within this broad framework of the fundamental nature of reality and knowledge, it's difficult to say which specific part of Aristotle's system of thought is his most important contribution to Western civilization. High on the list, however, must be his formulation of the laws of logic, the rules of definition, the nature of truth (and falsity),[8] the rules of deductive reasoning, and the nature of inductive reasoning—all topics in the field of *logic*, which is the method of correctly identifying and reasoning about reality. This is

why Aristotle is regarded, with little dissent, as the "Father of Logic."

His laws of logic are widely regarded in Aristotelian circles as being both laws of thought and laws of reality, and as being the former because more fundamentally they are the latter. H. W. B. Joseph succinctly states: "… unless the primary Laws of Thought were Laws of Things, our thought would be doomed by its very nature to misapprehend the nature of things" ([1906] 1916, 13). Leonard Peikoff, Ayn Rand's associate, agrees: "The principles of logic must be based on the facts of reality. The principles cannot be open to arbitrary human choice or subjective social whim. To use a technical term, they must be ontological…" (1974, lecture 1).

It is true that fundamental principles, definitions, and intuitive reasoning all existed before Aristotle's time, but he developed and codified them to a level only rivaled, not surpassed, by modern logic.[9] Moreover, not only does Aristotle's system of logic provide guidance for the proper pursuit of valid knowledge, but it is also indispensable for understanding and rejecting false claims and faulty arguments. Until you can *prove* that such claims or arguments are false or faulty, you don't really know *that* they are, and you are skating on thin ice, intellectually speaking, until and unless you use logic and reason to work it out.[10]

A close second is *dialectics*, Aristotle's signature philosophical method, which he developed and applied in his *Topics* and elsewhere. Dialectics may be defined as "the art of context-keeping" (Sciabarra 2000, 2). The tools of this art are the various techniques that seek to understand an object of study or a problem by grasping its larger context and tracing its various causes and effects across time. The purpose of such adherence to the wider factual context of something is to make sure that our ideas about it are solidly grounded in the real world and firmly interconnected.

Not just in his ethics, but in his works more generally, Aristotle characteristically begins by carefully laying out the historical context of his subject along with the "state of the debate." He shows the partial truths and errors in other theories, and only then draws out his own views in contrast. This dialectical method and its integrative power[11] is a large part of why we experience Aristotle's philosophy as being a system—and *his ethics as an integral part of that system*, rather than just another collection of ideas on

yet another subject of interest. By stressing this aspect of knowledge and truth-seeking in his lectures on metaphysics and physics, Aristotle gave the strongest possible foundation to all subsequent philosophy and science, and he is, therefore, justifiably also regarded as the "Father of Dialectics."

Logic as much as science is vitally served by dialectical bolstering of its foundations. Thus, one of Aristotle's most important applications of dialectics was in securing the foundations of logic itself by answering the Sophist attacks on the Law of Contradiction. This principle is one of the two strongest implications of the Law of Identity and a serious roadblock to unethical and manipulative argumentation. To tie it down and thereby to thwart the Sophists, he employed not one but two dialectical techniques. First, he introduced the "dialectical qualification" that a thing cannot be other than itself *at a given time and in a given respect*. He then nailed shut the coffin of skeptic denial of logic by means of the technique known as Reaffirmation Through Denial, which shows that anyone seeking to deny non-contradiction (and identity) has to assume it in the very act of attempting to deny it. By this dialectical one-two punch, Aristotle made the laws of logic impervious to skeptic attacks—no mean feat!

Another major coup that Aristotle finessed in dialectical fashion has ramifications for the way we have developed our views on self-actualization and freedom and flourishing. Since it is a fascinating story in itself as well, here is a brief sketch of how it unfolded.[12]

The two great facts of reality that the ancient Greeks struggled to reconcile were Being and Change. Things exist, and things are happening. Being is the ontological setting of identity, just as, Francis H. Parker and Henry B. Veatch note, Change is "the ontological setting of causation" (1959, 218). To put it simply: if you want to find identity, look for something that exists—and if you want to find causation, look for something that is happening. (You won't find them anywhere else!) There is a world of things that have natures or identities and that are not eternally static entities, but material objects that undergo change.

This is all obviously present to our sensory awareness—but how are we to make logical sense out of it? Some of the ancient Greeks followed Heraclitus, rejecting identity in favor of change, while others followed

Parmenides, rejecting change in favor of identity. Plato was only able to resolve the stalemate by positing two worlds, a constantly changing realm of flux and a timeless, unchanging "World of Forms." Aristotle dispensed with the unchanging domain in favor of one world, this earth, and properly resolved the dilemma with his formulations of the laws of identity and causality.[13]

To recap: Being is real. Things have a nature. At any given time and in any given respect, they are what they are and not something else. Thus, things can *become* other than what they are, but they cannot simultaneously *be* other than what they are. This shows in yet another way that the Law of Contradiction is not a timeless absolute, but a statement of *contextual necessity*.

Similarly, in regard to causality, John Herman Randall, Jr. points out, "Aristotle defends his conception of the operation of powers [i.e., an entity exercising its capacity to engage in action] in the only way in which such an ultimate distinction can be defended, by a dialectical development of the consequences of denying it" (1960, 171). Thus, as Aristotle showed, "Becoming" is real, too. Things change, but they change according to their nature, by operating their natural powers or being operated upon according to the laws of nature; accordingly, the world is (in this sense) lawful and orderly, not a Heraclitan flux in which "nothing abides." This is the ultimate foundation for all the natural sciences. It has never been overturned, and it never will be. To some readers all this may seem too commonsensical, but there are philosophies that deny or ignore metaphysical foundations, hence they are worth restating.

Although Aristotle has been ridiculed by some modern philosophers and scientists for certain flawed ideas about physics and biology put forward some 2,300 years ago, he also made numerous empirical discoveries, especially in the life sciences, which remain correct to this day. In addition, in his *History of Animals,* Aristotle presented a pathbreaking system for classifying living organisms that survived for two millennia, all the more remarkably because it was only based on functional and structural similarities rather than their deeper source in genetic relationships.

The reason for the extreme longevity of Aristotle's biological classification

scheme was no doubt his innovative way of defining things in general, and living beings in particular, according to their "genus" and "differentia." On the basis of observed similarities and differences, he placed every object into a group of similar things and then distinguished some of them from the others on the basis of a unique feature they possessed that the others didn't. This method of defining concepts has remained intact even longer than Aristotle's biological taxonomy, because it is based on the fundamental nature of the way human beings form concepts, and it keeps our conceptual knowledge both inter-connected and tied to observational reality.

As for physics, Aristotle's writings on causality itself were surprisingly modern, as were his ideas on the relativity of motion and the nature of space and time. In particular, he strongly anticipated Isaac Newton's first law of motion, more familiarly known as "the law of inertia," which states that "if a body is at rest or moving at a constant speed in a straight line, it will remain at rest or keep moving in a straight line at constant speed unless it is acted upon by a force."[14]

As major a scientific breakthrough as this was, however, we can now see that Newton's law of inertia was actually a special case of Aristotle's theory of motion, which was formulated broadly enough to apply across the board. This theory, which clearly applies to inanimate objects such as billiard balls or even flowing water (an example used by Aristotle), also applies to living beings. Just as hydrogen and oxygen together, in appropriate conditions of temperature and pressure, if not interfered with by some other substance, will combine to form water rather than hydrogen chloride or sulfur dioxide, so too will an acorn (another example of Aristotle's), under appropriate conditions of sunlight, moisture, etc., develop into an oak tree, rather than, say, an elm tree, a laughing hyena, or the Brooklyn Bridge. In this respect, it is Aristotle's law of identity applied to action. In this way, Aristotle laid the foundation not only for Newton's breakthrough ideas, but for all of the natural sciences, from physics and chemistry through biology and psychology.[15]

We can see now that there is a second important way, complementary to the first, in which Aristotle resolved the split between the partisans of "Being" and "Change."

- In regard to Being, Aristotle showed that each instance of identity (each aspect of the identity of a thing) is a power determining what the entity *can* do, its *potential* (capacity, power) for initiating causation (for acting in some way or other).

- Similarly, in regard to Change, Aristotle showed that each instance of causation (each action of a thing) is determined by the nature or identity of the entity that acts, and that causation is the *actualizing* of that identity.

Aristotle thoroughly explored these points in his writings on the "categories" and the "four causes." Integrating it all is a deep, two-way connection between the Categories and the Causes that firmly ties together Being and Change, identity and causality, under the rubric of a single, unified entity ontology (or "substance ontology," as it is more commonly called in academic works).

Individual things, or entities ("primary substances," Aristotle called them), are the fundamental constituents of the world and are the nexus of both identity and causality, as he showed throughout his various discussions of the Categories and the Four Causes.[16] Moreover, in Aristotle's view, not only are individual things the nexus of Being and Change, identity and causality, but also, in contrast to Plato's view, individual things are also more real than the abstractions we form about them as we learn concepts and form generalizations.[17] To put it more bluntly: individual things are the core reality of the universe as well as in human thought and action.

This is why individual things are the foundation of Aristotelianism as a system of ideas and as a foundation for subsequent science and philosophy. More importantly, for our purposes here, this entity ontology, embedded throughout Aristotle's thought, is also the foundation of *individualism*, both individualist self-actualization in ethics (see chapter 4) and in individual rights in politics—flourishing and freedom—which we discuss and expand upon in chapters 5 and 6.

III. Aristotle's Ethics and the Biology and Psychology It Rests On

Moving now to Aristotle's ethics and its scientific foundations, we see that, here too, Aristotle is a realist. He holds that the basis for an ethics aimed at successful life and happiness is the *real* (and, in that sense, "objective") nature of the world and of human beings—and that the basic virtue of such an ethics is the use of the fundamental, distinctively human, *real* attribute and power of reason to guide one's actions in dealing with the real world.

With Aristotle, for the first time in human history, we can see ethics being formulated as a framework for virtuous action and habit formation that is inextricably linked to two elements: (1) the unique aspects of our human nature, including our mode of survival and action, and (2) the nature of the physical and societal world around us. If we misunderstand either of these complex networks of interrelated facts, our ethics will be flawed or even unworkable as a guide to living in the real world. Aristotle, however, got both of the elements of realist, naturalistic, humanistic ethics correct in a foundational way, in their essence. The paint on level two may be flecked, and a brick or two missing on level four, but we contend that there is no basic error in Aristotle's philosophical skyscraper as we seek to add a twenty-first century level to this awesome building. We do so in chapters 5 and 6, after expanding in chapters 3 and 4 upon a more extensive array of facts about human nature than Aristotle had to work with, in both the psychological and the existential realms.

However, in his own ethical and political writings, over two millennia ago, Aristotle already had a lot of true and useful things to say about how to become the best person you can be, how to flourish and live a good, full life, both as an individual and as one living among others. His views on this subject were deeply informed by his studies of living beings in general, those endeavors earning him the title (among many others) of the "Father of Biology."

Aristotle had a comprehensive view, noted by Aquinas and numerous others, of what constitutes a full life, of how all living creatures could live the fullest life proper to their specific natures. He expressed his model in terms that apply generally to all individual living organisms, from plants to animals to human beings. For example, in *Meteorology*, of all places (a