*The Nicomachean Ethics* – Aristotle

*The Nicomachean Ethics* is one of two extant works about ethics written by Aristotle, the other being The *Eudemian Ethics* which, it is generally believed, was written before *The Nicomachean Ethics*;the latter being thought to represent Aristotle’s more mature thoughts on the subject. The *Ethics* was named after Aristotle’s son, Nicomachus, (the *Eudemian Ethics* was likewise named after its editor, Eudemus) and, rather than being written as a complete book, is thought to be a collection of Aristotle’s teaching notes.

Perhaps the first and most important point to make about this text is that the title may give the modern reader a slightly misleading impression. When we think of ethics and virtue, we tend to think of morality and questions of right and wrong or good and bad; but the ancient Greeks had very different ideas on the subject. ‘Ethics’ was a much broader concept that encapsulated notions of an entire life lived well and this is reflected in the Greek word, *arête*, which is usually translated as ‘virtue’ (a word we automatically associate with morality) but is actually more like ‘excellence.’ With that said, I would maintain that *The Ethics* isn’t actually a book about morality at all, but rather it’s about how to live an ‘excellent’ life; how to successfully live as a human being should.

Another preliminary point to take note of is the way Aristotle conducts his actual inquiry. Those familiar with other ethical theories (such as utilitarianism or deontology) will be accustomed to seeing the respective philosophers dive straight into first principles and build their case from the ground up, as it were. Aristotle does not do this. Instead, he considers people and actions we typically praise and consider deserving of honour, and working backwards from there, dissects precisely what it is in the individual or action that we find laudable before eventually classing that as a virtue. The contemporary ethical system, ‘virtue ethics’, essentially codifies this through defining virtuous conduct as conduct which a virtuous agent would engage in. This arises naturally from *The Nicomachean Ethics* which is predominantly, a detailed (and quite pedantic) portrait of what a virtuous individual looks like.

*The Nicomachean Ethics* is not a particularly stimulating read. Aristotle spends about 70% of the book doing nothing more than analysing specific virtues in painstaking depth, often going around and around in his explanation as if he’s trying to cover every possible angle from which one could consider the topic in question. It’s a difficult and dry book to read thoroughly (I don’t think any of his other works come out much better, particularly when compared to the writings of his teacher, Plato) but worth engaging, if for no other reason than the fact that it was written by one of the men who will forever claim a rightful and prominent place at the vanguard of Western philosophy.

*The Nicomachean Ethics* is composed of ten books, or chapters, and in this summary I will follow that sequence briefly describing the main topic and salient points that emerge from each section.

Book 1: The Object of Life

In this book, Aristotle is concerned primarily with delineating what he considers to be the ultimate goal in life, the supreme good, i.e. happiness (*eudemonia*).

Aristotle first makes it clear that the supreme good must be something that is undertaken for the sake of itself and not for the purpose of something else. In other words, for the end we are aiming at to be ultimate (i.e. the one we are interested in) it must not be one that is carried out merely in order to achieve some other end (which would therefore necessarily be more desirable). This automatically rules out money because money is always obtained with some other end in mind.

He then classifies his inquiry one of political science because it is political science that concerns itself with determining what is to be taught to individuals in the state (i.e. how to live the good life) and notes that as such, it will necessarily be imprecise since such matters that fall under this rubric are highly contextual and nuanced, meaning that specific rules can never apply with equal force in all situations. E.g. if we fix a hard and fast rule that says lying is always wrong, we will eventually find ourselves in a situation where telling the truth would not be the best thing to do. Life (and morality) is too complex to allow for such simplistic approaches. Like it or not, whatever guidelines we might derive, by necessity (just because of the subject matter), they will never be more than guidelines and will involve a healthy dose of discretion to account for the particular details pertinent to each individual situation. This effectively places Aristotle in complete opposition to deontological ethical systems.

At this point, Aristotle rejects the notion that there is a single, universal good such as Plato believed principally because he thinks that things are called good in many senses; in quality (virtues), quantity (moderation), time (opportunity), etc. Moreover, if the good was universal in this sense we would be able to identify a single science in which to study it (a ‘science’ of the good) but each of these categories falls under a plurality of different sciences; moderation in diet is medical science, but in exercise is physical training. With such a diverse number of ways in which things can be good and the diverse number of ways in which we study these goods, it can’t be true that there could be a single idea that could embody all of them.

However, as we already discussed, there must be a supreme good for man in the sense of the ultimate end for a completely satisfying life, an end which all other ends point to. What could this be? Aristotle thinks happiness fits this requirement. The only end we desire for itself (and the single end that lies at the terminus of a chain of ends) is happiness. I should point out here that happiness (*eudaimonia* in Greek) is less like an emotion than it sounds to a modern ear. We think of happiness as being a brief and easily changeable emotion, but *eudaimonia* has a more durable and sustained quality to it. Happiness is fleeting precisely because it is not the norm, it is a moment in which we are elevated above our normal state. *Eudaimonia*,on the other hand, gives the impression more of a balanced, enduring state of mind. It is this that Aristotle thinks we are all aiming at.

Aristotle now wonders exactly what this happiness consists of. To derive this, he explores the function of human beings. He justifies looking for a function in the first place by noting that craftspeople all have functions and so do the various parts of our bodies; eyes, hands, etc. and declaring that by extension it is only natural that human beings also have a function.

Next, he rules out nutrition and growth since we share these aspects with plants. He also eliminates a kind of sentient life because we share this with animals. What’s left then is a rational life. So, if the function of humans is to perform actions in accordance with a rational principle, then the function of a good human must be to perform those actions well, and since preforming something well is to perform something excellently (*arête*) then the good for humans turns out to be activity in accordance with virtue. Aristotle adds that this must be over a complete lifetime (in alignment with our earlier discussion of *eudaimonia*), for a few moments of brief happiness can’t qualify to make a man happy.

Aristotle makes a few more distinctions here:

* He makes it clear that happiness consists in the *exercise* of virtue rather than its *possession* because it is possible for the *state* to be present without any benefit, i.e. when one is asleep.
* He also claims that the virtuous life naturally gives pleasure because virtuous acts are pleasant by nature thereby satisfying those who think happiness lies in pleasure.
* He concedes that we need some external goods (and therefore some good fortune) in order to be happy. He rejects the idea that someone can be happy if they are ugly, of low birth, solitary, or childless, for example. There are a couple of caveats to make surrounding this point though; first, Aristotle thinks that anyone not incapacitated for goodness can achieve happiness through study and habituation. Happiness is a learnt quality; indeed he claims that it would be a “gross disharmony” if the most important thing in life, our happiness, were left to chance. Second, no truly happy individual can become miserable because she will bear her fortunes with dignity and is not easily dislodged from her happiness by ordinary misfortunes.
* Aristotle also makes it clear that happiness is an activity of the ‘soul’, by which he means specifically not the body. Like Plato before him, he tends to disregard the physical.

In summary then, happiness for a human is being active in accordance with virtue (since this is rational) and “adequately furnished” with external goods over a complete lifetime.

There is also a curious discussion here where Aristotle asks about whether the dead are affected by the fortunes of their descendants. To the modern reader this seems ludicrous but it brings us nicely back to the earlier point about *eudaimonia*. “Happiness” for Aristotle is more like a “successful” life and as such, includes the success of our relatives, even post-mortem. This reinforces the fact that “happiness” (*eudaimonia*) is not just a pleasant emotion since it can even be influenced after death when others reflect on your life. Aristotle concludes that a person’s felicity is affected post-mortem but not so much so as to make the happy unhappy or vice-versa.

Book 2: Moral Goodness

In this section, Aristotle investigates virtue.

First, he distinguishes between two kinds of virtues; moral and intellectual. The former is acquired by habit and is therefore not innate, while the latter is instilled by instruction and therefore requires time and experience. He also points out that all virtues are strengthened by the same activities that give rise to them. By this Aristotle means that doing brave acts is not only virtuous but strengthens and actually produces that particular virtue.

The pleasure or pain that actions cause agents can be used as a gauge to measure that agent’s moral progress. The good person will derive pleasure from acting in accordance with the virtues while the ‘less good’ person will find adhering to the virtues an inconvenience or hindrance. Aristotle’s example is a person who takes joy in abstaining from bodily pleasures versus a person who finds it irksome. The former is temperate, the latter licentious.

Aristotle surprisingly affirms here that the virtues are all about pleasure and pain. We tend to think virtuous conduct has nothing to do with pleasure; after all, if we all did what was pleasurable, how many of us would do the right thing? And that is precisely Aristotle’s point. It is not enough for us to *want* to do the right thing, we must actually take pleasure from doing it. Aristotle is saying that in ethics, our irrational desires will frequently trump our rational intentions. And this takes us back to the importance of training and habit. We must be conditioned to feel pleasure in doing the right things, at the right time, in the right way, etc. This is what will make the difference between a good and a bad individual.

Regarding the virtuous act, Aristotle makes clear that an act isn’t virtuous just because it is of a certain quality. He mentions three additional features that must exist to qualify it as virtuous:

1. The agent must know what he or she is doing.
2. The agent must choose it and choose it for its own sake.
3. The agent must do it from a fixed and permanent disposition.

From all of this, it is clear that Aristotle considers the agent and his/her disposition a key feature in the virtuous act. An accidental act of kindness (which would perhaps be classified as friendliness in Aristotle’s schema) or an act of bravery performed to receive honour or telling the truth on a whim, as it were, all serve to negate the act from being virtuous. This focus on the virtuous agent distinguishes Aristotle from utilitarianism in particular (but also deontology) with its focus on outcomes.

Now, Aristotle gives probably his most well-known contribution to ethics, the doctrine of the mean which states that virtue falls in a continuum between excess and deficiency. Courage, for example, is the midpoint between rashness (an excess) and cowardice (a deficiency). This leads naturally to Aristotle’s ‘formula’ for virtue; feeling fear, confidence, anger, pleasure, etc. at the right times on the right grounds towards the right people for the right motive and in the right way, is to feel them to an intermediate degree. It is also important to note that the mean is not the same for everyone. Aristotle illustrates this by considering the diet of two people, a famous wrestler and a person just beginning training. The mean quantity of food for the (presumably large) veteran wrestler will be much more than that for the beginner. This is a perfect example of why we saw Aristotle remark that ethics is necessarily an *in*exact endeavour and can’t be laid out in fixed propositions.

Book 3: Moral responsibility: Two Virtues

In this section, Aristotle embarks on an excruciatingly detailed analysis of voluntary acts and choice before turning to two virtues; courage and temperance.

There is no point in over-dissecting this section so I will attempt to grossly simplify what Aristotle has to say. He distinguishes between voluntary, involuntary, and non-voluntary acts. *Involuntary* acts are those performed through ignorance (only where the agent suffers subsequent pain and repentance) or under external compulsion. All other acts performed through ignorance are *non-voluntary*.

All acts performed by *choice* are *voluntary* but the opposite is not true. Aristotle considers voluntariness to be wider than choice. Choice involves deliberation and is therefore about means, not ends, and only concerns options that lie within our power. Since the means concern actions, it is here that virtue operates.

Aristotle raises an interesting point next. What if our assessment of the appropriate end is out of our control? What if our ability to discern the correct and virtuous end depends on the nature of our character which is completely out of our control? Then no one can be blamed for their vices. Aristotle defuses this problem by saying that even if this situation is granted, (i.e. the end we think of as virtuous is determined by an innate, and therefore uncontrollable, nature) the *means* (virtuous actions) to those ends still fall within our choice since they are always open to deliberation. There is an important distinction here between our actions and our dispositions (our stable character). Aristotle holds the former to be completely under our control whereas our dispositions aren’t, presumably because they are determined by habit, over which we can only exert control in the beginning.

From here, Aristotle is mainly concerned with the virtues. I won’t discuss these in great detail but will only note a few interesting/controversial points about each.

*Courage* is not just about being brave. First of all, it is about being brave at the right time, towards the right objects, etc. but second, it is also about feeling fear in the right places, at the right times, etc. For example, Aristotle states that a decent person will fear disgrace (only to the appropriate degree, of course). As we have seen, the deficiency is *cowardice* and the excess is *rashness*.

*Temperance* is self-control and is concerned with physical pleasures, not pleasures of the ‘soul’, e.g. a love of learning. Touch is the grossest physical pleasure and the one we should be most wary of although taste also gets a mention. Aristotle specifically mentions food, drink, and sex in this category. The excess is *licentiousness* and the deficiency is *insensibility*.

Book 4: Other Moral Virtues

*Liberality* is concerned with having the right attitude towards money (i.e. spending and giving) on a small scale. It is difficult for the liberal individual to become wealthy because he will typically give too much. Aristotle also recognises that liberality is to be judged in relation to the agent’s resources, i.e. a relatively poor individual can be more liberal than a wealthy one who spends more in actual dollars (in the right way, at the right time, etc.) but less in proportion to her total wealth. The excess is *prodigality* and the deficiency is *illiberality*.

*Magnificence* also deals with money but only expenditure and concerning larger amounts than liberality. Aristotle praises the individual who can spend large sums with good taste. Unlike liberality, the poor individual cannot be magnificent because the amounts involved are too large. The excess is *vulgarity* and the deficiency is *pettiness*.

*Magnanimity* is concerned primarily with honour and is manifest in the person who believes herself to be worthy of great things because she actually *is* worthy of those things. The excess is *vanity* and the deficiency is *pusillanimity*.

Aristotle also identifies another virtue here on a smaller scale than magnanimity which seems to do with love of honour. The excess is *ambition* and the deficiency is *unambitiousness*. The mean lacks a name.

*Patience* is concerned with anger and describes not the individual who never gets angry, but one who gets angry at the right time, the right place, to the right degree, etc. It is the intermediate state between *irascibility* (excess) and *lack of spirit* (deficiency).

*Friendliness* is the mean in the realm of social conduct and falls in the mean between the excess, *obsequiousness* (praising everything and offering no resistance), and the deficiency, *surliness* (always taking the opposite position).

*Truthfulness* is concerned with acknowledging the qualities she possesses without exaggerating (*boastfulness*) or depreciating (*understatement*) them.

*Wittiness* is concerned with conversation. The excess is *buffoonery* and the deficiency is *boorishness*.

Book 5: Justice

Justice means being both fair and lawful. In this sense then, it is directed towards other people. It is not a virtue because it *is* virtue. What Aristotle is saying is that what, as justice, is concerned with others, is the same as what, as virtue, is concerned with the individual agent him or herself. Both acts are the same, just pointed in different directions, as it were.

Book 6: Intellectual Virtues

Aristotle now discusses the intellectual virtues which are concerned with discerning the truth and give us the ability to identify the mean in each particular situation.

The first five intellectual virtues are *art* (concerned with production, not action), *science* (concerned with objects of necessity and proceeding by deduction), *prudence* (a kind of practical wisdom which guides us in our deliberations), *intuition* (concerned with first principles and universals because these cannot be scientifically determined), and *wisdom* (intuition and scientific knowledge).

Other intellectual virtues:

*Resourcefulness* – correct deliberation

*Understanding* – concerned with making judgements in perplexing matters

*Judgement* – judging correctly what is equitable

*Cleverness* – this refers to how capable a person is at carrying out the means to his or her ends. It is praiseworthy if the end is good, but blameworthy if the end is bad.

Book 7: Continence and Incontinence: The Nature of Pleasure

In this section, Aristotle considers pleasure again.

The most interesting discussion here is where he considers Socrates’ claim that nobody acts consciously against what he holds to be the best; i.e. people do wrong only through ignorance. He first notes that this conclusion is at odds with observable facts. People often do seem to do what they know is wrong.

Aristotle offers four reasons why people with knowledge of the right and wrong appear to choose the latter:

1. One may have knowledge without using it, i.e. not reflecting on it at the time one performs the act.
2. Errors may arise in the “practical syllogism”[[1]](#footnote-1) where the agent exercises his knowledge of the universal but not of the particular. Since the particular leads directly to action, failing to correctly account for this leads to a bad act.
3. Circumstances may obstruct the use of the knowledge, as in when we are caught in an emotion.
4. The influence of desire on the practical syllogism. This occurs when two competing major premises, such as (a) “sweet food is bad for me” and (b) “sweet food is delicious”, are combined with a minor premise “this is sweet food”. The agent effectively chooses (b) over (a) and indulges by eating the food.

These explanations show that Socrates was right after all. When an agent does wrong, the ‘knowledge’ they were acting on at that moment (the all-important moment when the act was performed) is not actually ‘knowledge’ in the strict sense. In other words, they were acting without knowledge.

Aristotle also distinguishes between the incontinent and the licentious. The latter pursues his vices believing himself to be right whereas the former lacks any such conviction. As such, the incontinent are easier to change than the licentious.

Book 8: Three Kinds of Friendship

Aristotle affirms that friends are important to a happy life.

Next, he says that things are lovable for one of three reasons; that is, being useful, pleasant, or good. The three kinds of friendship align with this. Friendship based on utility is motivated by concern for the agent’s own good. Friendship based on pleasure is motivated by the agent’s concern for his or her own pleasure. Since these friendships are based on things other than the person befriended Aristotle calls them *accidental*. Accidental friendships are easily dissolved as when the factor that caused utility or pleasure disappears, so does the motivation for the friendship. Friendship based on the good is the most enduring and is aroused by a concern for the welfare of the other. These kinds of friendships need time and intimacy to develop.

Aristotle also considers friendship between unequals, e.g. parent and child. He affirms that the better of the pair must be loved more than he or she loves (irrespective of whether the relationship is based on utility, pleasure, or the good.

He also says there can be no friendship towards inanimate things, animals, or slaves *as* slaves. Interestingly however, we can have a friendship with a slave *as* a human being.

Book 9: The Grounds of Friendship

This section is notable for the brief mention in passing where Aristotle defines love as being not enjoyment at the sight of a person but longing for that person when they are absent.

Aristotle also discusses whether it is right for someone to love themselves. He considers that a person’s best friend is the one who wishes him or her well and does so for his or her own sake. The person that best fits this description is him or herself. He also says that “all friendly feelings for others are extensions of a man’s feelings for himself.” Of course, when we say that some people love themselves most it is clearly a bad thing because it means they will assign to themselves an unfair proportion of something or favour themselves over others in some other way. Aristotle resolves this by stating that it is right for the good individual to be self-loving but not for the bad man.

In this section, he also cautions against having as many friends as possible (he might consider 3,000 facebook friends a few too many) but recommends having enough to form an “intimate circle”.

Book 10: Pleasure and the Life of Happiness

In this section, Aristotle discusses pleasure a little more and goes into more detail on exactly what constitutes happiness.

Of the different physical pleasures sight is superior to touch and hearing and smell to taste. Aristotle also makes it clear that all intellectual pleasures are superior to any physical ones.

Expanding on what he had earlier said about happiness; he says that the happy life implies seriousness as opposed to merely amusing oneself. We can see traces of his belief that happiness is not the “vulgar” emotion we typically associate it with these days.

And now we get to the final and arguably most important point of *The Nicomachean Ethics*. We have already seen that happiness is activity in accordance with virtue. Aristotle now adds that since happiness is the ultimate good, surely the virtue we are talking of here must be the *highest* virtue. This turns out to be contemplation. There are a few reasons Aristotle draws this conclusion:

1. The intellect is the highest thing in us
2. The objects the intellect apprehends are the highest things we can know
3. Contemplation is the most continuous activity we are capable of
4. Happiness must contain pleasure and the highest form of pleasure is that derived from wisdom

The happiest life is the life based on intellect, that is to say, engaged in contemplation. He even goes so far as to say not only is contemplation happiness, but the more one contemplates the happier one is. Aristotle sees contemplation/wisdom as something divine and when we undertake it we are partaking in the divine. Indeed, he considers the intellect to be a divine part of us.

Aristotle supports this thesis by going so far as to consider what the gods must spend their time doing. He thinks that any of the other virtues he has outlined would hardly be fitting when applied to gods, e.g. they couldn’t be liberal for surely they wouldn’t use money. The only action befitting the gods would be contemplation.

Moral activity (that in accordance with any other virtue) is therefore a secondary form of happiness because it is human, as opposed to divine.

Of course, in line with everything Aristotle has already said, contemplation is not the *only* thing in a happy life. Perhaps gods can get away with just this but not so for us humans. Because we have a mortal aspect to us, we also need certain other external goods to be properly happy. We should however, not take this to extreme for one only needs a moderate amount of other goods for happiness.

One of the last things Aristotle says in *The Ethics* is that it is difficult to change by argument habits which have been reinforced over a long time. He says that the mind of the student ought to be prepared by habit in advance if moral progress is desired because someone used to acting on their feelings will seldom be persuaded by reason.

Closing Comments

*The Nicomachean Ethics* can effectively be summarised thus:- the supreme good is happiness 🡪 it is our function to act rationally 🡪 happiness (for a human) is activity in association with virtue 🡪 the highest virtue is contemplation 🡪 therefore happiness is contemplation.

In truth, Aristotle can probably be questioned on each of the links in the above chain of reasoning. Let’s start at the beginning where Aristotle claims that happiness is the ultimate good, the final end which we desire for the sake of itself. In my opinion, this is actually probably a fairly sturdy claim.

What about people who work or study hard to achieve their goals? They aren’t merely chasing happiness. Many people certainly don’t seem to be chasing ‘happiness’. The problem here is that we aren’t defining happiness as a comfortable, pleasant *feeling*, one peak amongst a sequence of peaks and troughs that make up our emotional lives. Happiness is more like a robust, *baseline* sense of satisfaction with life, perhaps better translated with a word like ‘equanimity’. Those who would balk at calling happiness the ultimate end are probably thinking of happiness in the former sense.

The second step is less convincing. Aristotle claims that it is our function to act rationally. There are two claims here. One, that humans have a function and two, that that function is to act according to reason. Let’s start with the first claim. Remember, Aristotle claims that all things have a function (a hand, an eye, etc.) and therefore the whole human being ought to have a function also. But I think this is specious at best.

The hand has a function but only in light of the goals of the human it is attached to. Aristotle also claims somewhere that it is the horse’s function to run fast, therefore the fastest horse is the “most excellent” one. But this again is only true in light of human goals and interests, i.e. we use horses to carry us places… quickly. In general, everything has a purpose but those purposes all stop at the human because we are conscious agents (the only ones we know of on our planet). It is impossible to reason from these (lower-than-human) levels to a new (higher-than-human) level where a purpose can be divined for the human being itself. Things have purposes because we assign them purposes but there is no one beyond us to assign us a purpose. Of course, this was less of a problem for Aristotle than it is for us because he lived in a world in which the existence of gods was taken for granted.

So having cast the idea of a human function into doubt, Aristotle’s second claim also falls flat. If we don’t have a function, it can’t be our function to act *any* way, let alone rationally. But even letting that point slide, the ancient Greek (and Enlightenment) obsession with reason has these days come under attack from a number of directions. Although we can grant that our reasoning abilities are among our most valuable skills, it would take a brave commentator to claim that humans are rational by nature (look at all the irrational things we do), or that this represents our highest ‘calling’ (think of the ultra-rational and logical Spock-type figure).

The third step is also a little difficult to swallow as it stands. Aristotle claims that happiness is fulfilling one’s function and so it follows that one ought to fulfil one’s function *well*. This notion of excellence is *arête* in Greek, but *arête* also has moral/virtuous connotations. So, for Aristotle, the slide from excellence to virtue is much smoother than it is for us, being facilitated linguistically and, also in all likelihood, culturally, by which I mean excellence was very likely naturally linked to the virtues in ancient Greek society. In other words, at the time Aristotle was writing, doing something well (fulfilling one’s function) automatically cashes out as doing something virtuously. We lack that automatic link and it results in one more place where Aristotle can be challenged.

The conclusion in the fourth step is also quite problematic. Again, in Aristotle’s time (after Socrates and Plato had revolutionised philosophy) the physical had taken a bit of a beating while the intellectual was considered obviously superior. The ‘obvious’ existence of the gods also lent a great deal of support to this claim. From this starting point, contemplation *does* in fact come out as the highest virtue. A modern reader however, might not be so quick to admit this, and I think Aristotle’s conclusion can rightly be, at the very least, called into question.

As I said at the beginning, many of Aristotle’s conclusions come from his (and other’s) intuitions. We praise this individual as being virtuous. Why? Because she performs some action, X. Therefore X must be a virtue or at least linked to virtue in some way. The advantage with this approach is that it would presumably have conformed to many of his reader’s expectations, i.e. he wasn’t offering an obscure or abstract theory they had to buy first before accepting his conclusions. The disadvantage is that any conclusions he draws will, almost necessarily, be limited by the social norms that dominate at the time. And so we see Aristotle linking excellence and virtue, venerating the rational in humanity, and invoking the gods to support his ideas.

At the end of the day, there is a lot of value to be taken from *The Nicomachean Ethics*, particularly in the first two or three chapters, and the thriving of ‘virtue ethics’ as a modern ethical theory testifies to this. However, some of his examples of virtue have become dated and obsolete and in the final analysis, I’m not sure his ultimate conclusion can gain much traction with a modern audience.

1. The practical syllogism is the way Aristotle thought we deliberate. It involves a major premise (which is a universal, such as “all dry food is good for humans”) and a minor premise (which is a particular, such as “this is dry food”). The conclusion of the major and minor premises is an action (i.e. eating the dry food). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)