

BOOKS JULY 3, 2023 ISSUE

# ARISTOTLE'S RULES FOR LIVING WELL

*The Nicomachean Ethics is an unexampled work by a paragon of classical thought. How does it hold up as a self-help manual?*

**By Nikhil Krishnan**

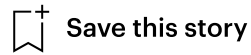
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Twenty-four centuries later, we're still guided by the approach toward ethical life that Aristotle exemplified, one in which the basic question is not what we do but who we are. Illustration by Barry Blitt





The Internet has no shortage of moralists and moralizers, but one ethical epicenter is surely the extraordinary, addictive subreddit called “Am I the Asshole?,” popularly abbreviated AITA. In the forum, which celebrates its tenth anniversary this summer, users post brief accounts of their interpersonal conflicts and brace themselves for the judgment of online strangers: usually either YTA (“You’re the asshole”) or NTA (“Not the asshole”). A team of moderators enforces the rules, of which the most important, addressed to the supplicant, reads “Accept your judgment.”

A few recent ones: Am I the asshole for “telling my brother that he is undateable?” For “asking my girlfriend to dress better on a date night?” For “refusing to resell my Taylor Swift Tickets?” Some posts have become famous, or Internet famous, like the one from a guy who asked an overweight seatmate on a five-hour flight to pay him a hundred and fifty dollars for encroaching on his space. The subreddit promises, in its tagline, “a catharsis for the frustrated moral philosopher in all of us.”

What’s striking about AITA is the language in which it states its central question: you’re asked not whether I did the right thing but, rather, what sort of *person* I’m being. And, of course, an asshole represents a very specific kind of character defect. (To be an asshole, according to Geoffrey Nunberg, in his 2012 history of the concept, is to “behave thoughtlessly or arrogantly on the job, in personal relationships, or just circulating in public.”) We would have a different morality, and an impoverished one, if we judged actions only with those terms of pure evaluation, “right” or “wrong,” and judged people only “good” or “bad.” Our vocabulary of commendation and condemnation is perpetually changing, but it

has always relied on “thick” ethical terms, which combine description and evaluation.

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This way of thinking about ethical life—in which the basic question is who we are, not what we do—has foundations in a work of Aristotle’s from the fourth century B.C., known as the *Nicomachean Ethics*. A new translation and abridgment, by the University of Pennsylvania philosopher and classicist Susan Sauvé Meyer, comes with a new title: “How to Flourish: An Ancient Guide to Living Well” (Princeton). The original text, Meyer explains, has been whittled down to “Aristotle’s main claims and positive arguments, omitting digressions, repetitions, methodological remarks, and skirmishes with opponents.”

The volume is part of a series of new translations of ancient texts. Aristotle’s *Poetics*, for instance, is now “How to Tell a Story: An Ancient Guide to the Art of Storytelling for Writers and Readers,” and Thucydides’ “*History of the Peloponnesian War*” is now “How to Think About War: An Ancient Guide to Foreign Policy.” You can debate whether these name changes are kitschy or canny, but the title “How to Flourish” isn’t that much of a stretch, because the *Nicomachean Ethics* is one of the handful of texts chosen that might plausibly be considered a guide in a sense we recognize today. Still, if Aristotle’s ethics is to be sold as a work of what we call self-help, we have to ask: How helpful is it?

**W**e know only a few things about the man who claimed to know how to flourish. He was born in 384 B.C., in a Macedonian city in what’s now northern Greece. His mother came from a wealthy family on the island of

Euboea; his father was a court physician to a Macedonian king. Aristotle was seventeen when he left his native land for Athens, where he evidently encountered Plato and his Academy—the legendary circle of scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers. When Plato died, in 347, Aristotle left Athens. About his reasons we can only speculate: one theory is that Aristotle was moved by the perennial anxieties of the immigrant without citizenship in a time of political strife. Outside on the streets, the orator Demosthenes was decrying the wickedness of Macedonians.

A few years later, Aristotle was engaged to tutor a young Macedonian prince, who would later be known as Alexander the Great. One of the more vivid depictions of the philosopher appears in Mary Renault’s “Fire from Heaven,” the opening volume in her splendid trilogy of novels about Alexander’s life. First laying eyes on his tutor, the prince sees “a lean smallish man, not ill-proportioned, who yet gave at first sight the effect of being all head.” A second look “revealed him to be dressed with some care and with the elegance of Ionia, wearing one or two good rings. Athenians thought him rather foppish. . . . But he did look like a man who would answer questions.”

He was certainly that. During an extraordinarily fertile career, he raised, often for the first time, questions in science and philosophy that he treated so thoroughly it was many centuries before anyone could improve on his answers. In ethics, at least, there’s a decent case that no one *has* improved much on them.

“How to flourish” was one such topic, “flourishing” being a workable rendering of Aristotle’s term *eudaimonia*. We might also translate the term in the usual way, as “happiness,” as long as we suspend some of that word’s modern associations; *eudaimonia* wasn’t something that waxed and waned with our moods. For Aristotle, ethics was centrally concerned with how to live a good life: a flourishing existence was also a virtuous one.

For first-time readers of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, though, the treatise is full of disappointments. It is not, strictly, a book by Aristotle; a later editor evidently stitched it together from a series of lecture notes. (Aristotle's father and son were named Nicomachus; the title may have honored one of them.) There are repetitions and sections that seem to belong in a different book, and Aristotle's writings are, as Meyer observes, "famously terse, often crabbed in their style." Crabbed, fragmented, gappy: it can be a headache trying to match his pronouns to the nouns they refer to. Some of his arguments are missing crucial premises; others fail to spell out their conclusions.

Aristotle is obscure in other ways, too. His highbrow potshots at unnamed contemporaries, his pop-cultural references, must have tickled his aristocratic Athenian audience. But the people and the plays he referred to are now lost or forgotten. Some readers have found his writings "affectless," stripped of any trace of a human voice, or of a beating human heart.

It gets worse. The book, though it purports to be about the question of how to flourish, is desperately short on practical advice. More of it is about what it means to be good than about how one becomes it. And then much of what it says can sound rather obvious, or inert. Flourishing is the ultimate goal of human life; a flourishing life is one that is lived in accord with the various "virtues" of the character and intellect (courage, moderation, wisdom, and so forth); a flourishing life also calls for friendships with good people and a certain measure of good fortune in the way of a decent income, health, and looks. Virtue is not just about acting rightly but about *feeling* rightly. What's best, Aristotle says, is "to have such feelings at the right time, at the right objects and people, with the right goal, and in the right manner." Good luck figuring out what the "right time" or object or manner is.

And virtue, his central category, gets defined—in a line that Meyer's abridgment culls—in terms that look suspiciously circular. Virtue is a state "consisting in a mean," Aristotle maintains, and this mean "is defined by reference to reason, that

is to say, to the reason by reference to which the prudent person would define it.” (For Aristotle, the “mean” represented a point between opposite excesses—for instance, between cowardice and recklessness lay courage.) The phrase “prudent person” here renders the Greek *phronimos*, a person possessed of that special quality of mind which Aristotle called “phronesis.” But is Aristotle then saying that virtue consists in being disposed to act as the virtuous person does? That sounds true, but trivially so.

To grasp why it may not be, it helps to reckon with the role that habits of mind play in Aristotle’s account. Meyer’s translation of “phronesis” is “good judgment,” and the phrase nicely captures the combination of intelligence and experience which goes into acquiring it, along with the difficulty of reducing it to a set of explicit principles that anyone could apply mechanically, like an algorithm. In that respect, “good judgment” is an improvement on the old-fashioned and now misleading “prudence”; it’s also less clunky than another standby, “practical wisdom.”

The enormous role of judgment in Aristotle’s picture of how to live can sound, to modern readers thirsty for ethical guidance, like a cop-out. Especially when they might instead pick up a treatise by John Stuart Mill and find an elegantly simple principle for distinguishing right from wrong, or one by Kant, in which they will find at least three. They might, for that matter, look to Jordan Peterson, who conjures up as many as twelve.

Treated as a serious request for advice, the question of how to flourish could receive a gloomy answer from Aristotle: it may be too late to start trying. Why is that? Flourishing involves, among other things, performing actions that manifest virtues, which are qualities of character that enable us to perform what Aristotle calls our “characteristic activity” (as Meyer renders the Greek *ergon*, a word more commonly, but riskily, translated as “function”). But how do we come to acquire these qualities of character, or what Meyer translates as “dispositions”? Aristotle answers, “From our regular practice.”

In a passage missing from Meyer's ruthless abridgment, Aristotle warns, "We need to have been brought up in noble habits if we are to be adequate students of noble and just things. . . . For we begin from the that; if this is apparent enough to us, we can begin without also knowing why. Someone who is well brought up has the beginnings, or can easily acquire them." "The that," a characteristically laconic formulation of Aristotle's, is generally taken to refer to the commonsense maxims that a passably well-parented child hears about not lying, fighting, or talking with food in one's mouth.

A search for what we might call "actionable" guidance will yield precious little. The text yields just enough in the way of glancing remarks to suggest that Aristotle may have been the sort of man who gave good advice. He says, for instance, that people in politics who identify flourishing with honor can't be right, for honor "seems to depend more on those who honor than on the one honored." This has been dubbed the "Coriolanus paradox": seekers of honor "tend to defeat themselves by making themselves dependent on those to whom they aim to be superior," as Bernard Williams notes. Replace "honor" with, say, "likes on Instagram" and you have a piece of advice that works as well now as it did in the fifth century B.C.

Aristotle suggests, more generally, that you should identify the vices you're susceptible to and then "pull yourself away in the opposite direction, since by pulling hard against one fault, you get to the mean (as when straightening out warped planks)." Only the vivid image of the warped planks keeps this remark from being the type of sententious counsel that Polonius might have given his son.





*“The person you’re trying to reach is available, but not answering this call because he hates all forms of confrontation.”*

Cartoon by Anjali Chandrashekar



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The question then must be faced: Is there anyone who both needs to hear what Aristotle has to offer and would be able to apply it? Sold as a self-help manual in a culture accustomed to gurus promulgating “rules for living,” Aristotle’s ethics may come as a disappointment. But our disappointment may tell us more about ourselves than it does about Aristotle.

**I** started to study Aristotle at the same time I was learning to cook. At college five thousand miles away from home, I found that it didn’t take long to tire of baked beans and something called “jacket potatoes.” There was Indian takeout, of

course, but it was not cheap, and the chefs came from parts of the subcontinent about as far away from my ancestral village as Oxford was from Jerusalem. It was in the days before obliging Indian grandmothers had YouTube channels, and no one seemed to have thought to write a book of recipes from our little corner of Kerala.

Not that a mere recipe would have helped. The philosopher Michael Oakeshott wrote that “nobody supposes that the knowledge that belongs to the good cook is confined to what is or may be written down in the cookery book.” Proficiency in cooking is, of course, a matter of technique. Sometimes we acquire our skills by repeatedly applying a rule—following a recipe—but when we succeed what we become are not good followers of recipes but good cooks. Through practice, as Aristotle would have said, we acquire judgment.

The existence of recipe books, I came to think, was itself a melancholy fact about a world of emigration and the growing distance between generations. The most widely available book of Indian recipes in Britain, by the actress and grande dame Madhur Jaffrey, was, in fact, assembled out of letters from her mother when she was a homesick drama student in nineteen-fifties London. Recipes were second best, the sign of a fall from a condition of organic wholeness.

As I blundered in the evenings at the single stovetop in the student kitchen I shared with half a rugby team, I was also working line by line through the text of the Nicomachean Ethics. I started with an English translation, and then turned to the original Greek, my familiarity with the language acquired over a frantic month at the geekiest summer camp in the world. Something about that juxtaposition—Aristotle in the mornings, clumsy pots of dal in the evenings—has inured me to all visions of moral philosophy as a simple variety of self-help.

At Oxford, the text had been taught the same way since at least the nineteenth century, in a series of weekly tutorials. Mine were solo, and my tutor was a man of

enormous charisma and intensity. I would read out my essay on the set passages of text—the local word for such extracts was the charmingly English “gobbet”—while in the background a kettle came climactically to the boil. My tutor would pour out strong black Indian tea along with some weakly complimentary judgment—usually, in my case, the damning “Thorough.” And then we’d start. He passed on to me a scholarly maxim that he had heard from his own tutor, a man combining great erudition and eccentricity who wore gold-rimmed spectacles and dressed like a fugitive from the eighteenth century: “How to read Aristotle? *Slowly.*”

I tried to comply, but I was never slow enough. There was always another nuance, another textual knot to unravel. My tutor’s fundamental pedagogical principle was that to teach a text meant being, at least for the duration of the tutorial, its most passionate champion. Every smug undergraduate exposé of a fallacy would be immediately countered with a robust defense of Aristotle’s reasoning. When I stayed on as a graduate student and edged into the strange and wonderful world of Oxford’s scholars of ancient philosophy, I attended seminars where hours were spent parsing a single Aristotelian sentence. At one session, a nervous participant asked, “Would you think it precipitate if we moved on to the next sentence?”

What we were doing with this historical text wasn’t history but philosophy. We were reading it not for what it might reveal about an exotic culture but for the timelessly important truths it might contain—an attitude at odds with the relativism endemic in the rest of the humanities. The deliberate pace of the Aristotelians who taught me was not only an intellectual strategy but also an enactment of the lesson of the text I was reading. There is no shortcut to understanding Aristotle, no recipe. You get good at reading him by reading him, with others, slowly and often. Regular practice: for Aristotle, it’s how you get good generally.

A few days into my Ph.D. program, I met a fellow-student, a logician, who announced that he didn't share my philosophical interests. "My parents taught me the difference between right and wrong," he said, "and I can't think what more there is to say about it." The appropriate response, and the Aristotelian one, would be to agree with the spirit of the remark. There is such a thing as the difference between right and wrong. But reliably telling them apart takes experience, the company of wise friends, and the good luck of having been well brought up. Even the philosophers who think that we would ideally act in accordance with storable principles must ask themselves how someone without experience could identify such principles in the first place.

I'm convinced that we are all Aristotelians, most of the time, even when forces in our culture briefly persuade us that we are something else. Ethics remains what it was to the Greeks: a matter of being a person of a certain sort of sensibility, not of acting on "principles," which one reserves for unusual situations of the kind that life sporadically throws up. That remains a truth about ethics even when we've adopted different terms for describing what type of person not to be: we don't speak much these days of being "small-souled" or "intemperate," but we do say a great deal about "douchebags," "creeps," and, yes, "assholes."

In one sense, it tells us nothing that the right thing to do is to act and feel as the person of good judgment does. In another sense, it tells us virtually *everything* that can be said at this level of generality. It points us in the right direction: toward the picture of a person with a certain character, certain habits of thinking and feeling, a certain level of self-knowledge and knowledge of other people. In Aristotle's view, I might, in a couple of years, be *just* about ready to start studying ethics.

Aristotle's world, like that of his teacher Plato, was one in which philosophy had to distinguish itself from rivals for the prestige and the authority it claimed. Those rivals, whom Plato regarded as hucksters and grifters, have been tarred forever by the disobliging epithet he gave them: "Sophist." The Sophists of the ancient world



were liberal with the “rules for living” that they gave the teen-age boys who were their most ardent (and paying) customers. Aristotle faced the challenge of courting the same constituency armed with a more modest product.

Later in his life, in 322, as anti-Macedonian sentiment surged among the Athenians after Alexander’s death, Aristotle left Athens to spend his final days in Chalcis, on his mother’s island of Euboea. An ancient source tells us that he did so to avoid the fate of Socrates, and to stop the Athenians committing “a second crime against philosophy.” He may not have been a modest man, but he hadn’t led a sheltered life.

Notoriously, the *Nicomachean Ethics* ends with a sort of plot twist. Until this point, Aristotle has spent most of his time on a patient explanation of the virtues of character, with only a brief digression to tell us about the virtues of the intellect. But the last few chapters contain a genuine surprise—if you have not been reading closely. The highest of the virtues, he announces, is not (as most of his original audience would have taken him so far to be saying) “good judgment” but, rather, one he labels with that beautiful Greek word *sophia*.

“Wisdom” is the usual translation, but Aristotle’s discussion of it makes it clear that he is using the word in what Meyer calls “a restricted technical sense.” Her rendering is “scientific learning.” Being *sophos*, Aristotle says, is “not only knowing what follows from the principles of a science but also apprehending the truth of the principles themselves.” Yet, if *sophia* is indeed a higher virtue than *phronesis*, mustn’t a life devoted to the exercise of “scientific learning” be a higher, a more flourishing, existence than one devoted to the exercise of “good judgment” in the practical spheres of living (running a household, ruling a city)? It surely would have surprised the aristocrats in Aristotle’s original audience to be told that their ambitions to be rich, well regarded, and powerful fell short of the highest flourishing of which human beings are capable.

Aristotle had little hope that a philosopher's treatise could teach someone without much experience of life how to make the crucial ethical distinctions. We learn to spot an "asshole" from living; how else? And, when our own perceptions falter, we continue to do today exactly what Aristotle thought we should do. He asserts, in another significant remark that doesn't make Meyer's cut, that we should attend to the words of the old and experienced at least as much as we do to philosophical proofs: "these people see correctly because experience has given them their eye."

Is it any surprise that the Internet is full of those who need help seeing rightly? Finding no friendly neighborhood *phronimos* to provide authoritative advice, you defer instead to the wisdom of an online community. Its members help you to see the situation, and yourself, in a different light. "The self-made man," Oakeshott wrote, "is never literally self-made, but depends upon a certain kind of society and upon a large unrecognized inheritance." If self-help means denying the role that the perceptions of others play in making us who we are, if it means a set of rules for living that remove the need for judgment, then we are better off without it.

We have long lived in a world desperate for formulas, simple answers to the simple question "What should I do?" Some of my contemporaries in graduate school, pioneers in what was then a radical new movement called "effective altruism," devised an online career-planning tool to guide undergraduates in their choice of careers. (It saw a future for me in computer science.) I've had bemusing conversations with teen-age boys in thrall to Andrew Tate, a muscled influencer who has as many as forty-one "tenets." My in-box is seldom without yet another invitation to complete an online course on the fine-grained etiquette of "diversity, equity, and inclusion." (Certificate awarded upon completion of multiple-choice test.)

But the algorithms, the tenets, the certificates are all attempts to solve the problem—which is everybody's problem—of how not to be an asshole. Life would

be a lot easier if there were rules, algorithms, and life hacks solving that problem once and for all. There aren't. At the heart of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is a claim that remains both edifying and chastening: phronesis doesn't come that easy. Aristotle devised a theory that was vague in just the right places, one that left, intentionally, space to be filled in by life. ♦

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