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The Concept of Obligation in Aristotle's
Nichomachean Ethics

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THE CONCEPT OF OBLIGATION IN
ARISTOTLE'S NICHOMACHEAN
ETHICS

by

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LIFE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS

This is a study of obligation. This is a study of one of the great, mysterious elements that lies deep within the moral and psychological life of each human being. The vast majority of men take its presence for granted, as an accustomed companion of their daily lives. It has long been considered as elementary to a man as the breath of his body so that only the philosophical few have ever turned explicit attention to analyze and probe this core of man's moral being.

Focusing on obligation, the study here at hand is first of all an inquiry. Our course is one of investigation in the pages of an ethical work standing at the summit of pre-Christian moral thought, the Nichomachean Ethics of Aristotle. Does the immortal author of the Ethics hold that obligation is a rationally discernible factor in moral life? The aim will be to determine precisely what idea he has here. Can a man be strictly bound to do or not to do any given action? If so, why is it so? And, of course, as in all philosophical thought, this one point is intricately and essentially involved with
various other basic concepts -- all of which must be given at least some consideration so that an adequate view of the subject be presented.

It will be well to state briefly at the very outset the precise goal of the investigation. In other words, before one can discover and study the concept of obligation in a certain philosophical work, such as the Ethics, it is highly advisable to set down that concept's distinguishing characteristics.

Briefly, then, obligation, though it may be defined and described in several ways, may be said to be the moral necessity of electing this or that act or course of action which is the means to attaining an absolutely necessary end. It is not a question of physical compulsion, but moral, and this moral necessity imposes a certain claim on the will to choose this, not that. Closely related to this notion is the factor of sanction, some penalty accruing to him who ignores that which is obligatory and so misses the end necessary to his very nature.

This topic of obligation holds certain aspects which tend to strike the student as somewhat surprising. He approaches it confident that an explicit, plain-speaking abundance of philosophical reasonings awaits the reader's attention, especi-
ally in a classical immortal such as Aristotle. And in a treatise long placed at the pinnacle of the pre-Christian moral works all the more does the student expect that many explicit reflections on obligation will be met. But the truth is quite otherwise. Little is mentioned explicitly. The message is carried by implication, by assumption, a situation which will require that one first of all make definite what has been left only indefinite, that he seek out the foundations of the moral structure presented in the Ethics.

It would be well at the outset to note that this study sets its sights, by way of delimitation, not on the whole body of Aristotelian thought pertaining to his idea of human obligation, but rather on one work only, namely, the Nichomachean Ethics. However, we will find ourselves necessarily impelled to consult other works of his where he discusses those profound concepts, metaphysical and psychological, which he applied to moral life in the Ethics. For Aristotle was a metaphysician, and his ethical concepts can only be properly grasped when they are seen metaphysically. The Ethics is no set of mere counsels or wise utterances on moral matters; it is in "direct contact with the realm of being"¹, a metaphysical study. But, as pointed out

just previously, very much of this foundational metaphysics is left implicit -- it must be mined because it does not lie on the surface.

Today, about us, much confusion surrounds current ideas of obligation. The common man and the philosopher alike find it somewhat problematical -- the former looks at it, looks away, looks back once more, and then decides to bypass it, leaving rationalizations and justifications to the philosopher. The philosopher does his best with scientific jargon, but ultimately concludes that secularism has made something of a moral curio of familiar Christian concepts of obligation.

The times in which we are living have been plagued by a woeful lack of stable moral values. The moral edifices of the day are insecure in their foundations, flimsy in their framework, and sorely open to ominous assaults of every sort. In place of the steel structure of Christian ethics have been substituted expediency, mere human decency, and propriety. The physical havoc of inter-continental warfares has had its moral counterpart.

Juvenile delinquency at home, delinquency among our armed forces abroad, the cynical selfishness of those who bought or sold in the black markets of the war years, the current rackets in house-renting and the buying of "used" cars, the whole mess of dirty linen that is being washed in congressional investigations -- what are these but evidences of how deeply the secularist dry-rot has undermined traditional Christian virtues.²

² America, November 29, 1947, page 231, "Man and His Maker"
Yet, for all this, the Scholastic ethician can never be shaken from his assurance that some sensitivity, some awareness of moral obligation continues to assert itself within the psychological world of each normal man's life. For it is a basic tenet of Scholastic ethics that no normal rational being (defined as possessing an expeditum usum rationis) lacks an interior awareness of the fundamental distinction between what is right and what is wrong—and, moreover, at once a further awareness that somehow he ought to elect the good and reject the evil.

Obligation, then, roots itself deep within the human

3 This important doctrine has been well expressed in the following: "The existence of an inward monitor that categorically dictates what we must do, what we must not do, or what we may do or leave undone, is the primary fact of our moral experience. . . . Whatever be the nature of this fact, howsoever it may be accounted for by theories, or analyzed psychologially, it is as patent and universal a fact as any that ever formed the subject-matter of a science. It is involved in all our moral experience, our moral conduct and character." - Timothy J. Brosnahan, Prolegomena to Ethics, Fordham University Press, New York, 1941, 4.

4 On a later page the same author, Brosnahan, brings out the universal human awareness of an interior "oughtness". The fact that we are conscious of a real distinction between good and evil may indeed be individually verified by introspection, may be inferred in others from manifestations similar to those that characterize its workings in ourselves, and is testified to by the literature and laws of all ages. We have, therefore, such verification of its universality as we have of any other mental quality. We know that others perceive color, possess reason, dislike pain, reverence uprightness only from the unchanging similarity of their judgments and actions with ours." (179-180)
soul, pagan or Christian, learned or unlearned, rich or poor. As quoted above, this stands as "the primary fact of our moral experience." Yet, as also noted above, the present days witness a widespread moral (or immoral, or better, amoral) atmosphere in which that interior sense of obligation is either openly challenged or ignored. Hence we can lay easy claim to a title of some importance some significance for any study -- such as our own -- attempting to play a part, however modest, in returning proper stress to a recognition of man's nature as an obliged nature.

Now, for the philosopher, obligation is a study both simple and complex. Its simplicity (a comparative simplicity, that is) resides in the fact that no longer is it an affair of great difficulty to establish the truth, as noted above, that all men of all ages have somehow acknowledged the element of obligation in human life. But simplicity, we fear, walks with us no more once the attempt is begun to render a complete, philosophical explanation of its nature and presence. This is complex. At this point it will be sufficient to indicate certain main points of the problem, by way of introduction.

Freedom of will must first be assumed. Unless this be true, the problem of obligation cannot be even conceived. For how is one to be under a moral necessity (duty, obligation) where a physical necessity already compels him in this or that act? But the, postulating such liberty, how does it happen that there
is nevertheless this interior, moral restriction on the free will which men have experienced universally? Is there some goal for human life -- established quite independently of the individual's consent or lack of it -- which must be reached else the person be definitively and permanently classified a failure? What could such a goal, such an objective, be to reach into the very heart of man, seize it with an iron-fisted compulsion, a moral compulsion, all the while respecting the freedom of man's will physically and basically? Indeed, can such a goal really be perceived, or is this sense of obligation an inexplicable mystery, perhaps a mere sentiment? Is there an authority outside of man capable of so binding, obliging, him? By what right? Moreover, perhaps the goal is one which the man can use his free will to ignore and still be little the worse of it -- since the goal, the end, is only sufficiently compelling for those who just happen to be attracted by it. Were this the case, then we have as yet found no explanation for obligation -- and it may be but a myth.

Now, when it is said that man ought or ought not elicit a certain volitional act, it is implied that (1) the proposed act is right and good, or wrong and evil; and (2) the will is faced with an obligation to elicit the good and avoid that evil. The will, however, clearly remains free physically. Why, then, is it morally bound? The answer is that the will has been the recipient, so to speak, of a command issued by the reasoning
faculty, an unconditioned command that the will elicit that act which has been perceived to be good, and forbidding it to elicit that act which has been perceived as evil. But freedom remains. The commanded good act, for instance, has been initially perceived as a particular means which is necessary in view of the necessary end of man's nature.

Determination, then, in the actions of an indetermined agent -- or moral necessity -- is a matter of finality, of end.

It is clear, then, that the only compulsion to which man can be subjected as man, i.e., as an indetermined agent, is moral necessity, which is established by a necessity for the attainment of that end. To state that this act is obligatory is to declare that this act is necessary in relation to this necessary end; obligation will be no more than the relation of a necessary act to a necessary end.

Our peculiar approach to this basic ethical problem will be an investigation of the illustrious Aristotelian text, the Nichomachean Ethics. Strange though it may seem, very little of this manner of investigation appears to have been done in Aristotle's Ethics on this point of obligation. Various authors touch around and about it but most rarely do any of them dwell upon it. The comments of many of these will, of course, be

5 For a very fine statement of this notion, see Ignatius W. Cox, Liberty, Its Use and Abuse, Fordham Press, New York, 1939, 7 f; also 71-3.

brought out in the course of this present study.

In the following chapter we shall begin our study by laying the groundwork which is first needed before we can present a philosophical treatment of Aristotle's notion of obligation. This notion will then be presented in the third chapter. That will be succeeded by a critique of Aristotle's position, based on principles of Thomistic philosophy (Chapter IV). A brief, concluding section will follow.

In beginning our study proper, Chapter II, we shall first address ourselves to certain preliminary problems which are essential to this study of obligation. The first of these is, quite logically, that we establish that Aristotle regarded man as somehow subject to some element of obligation, regardless of his ability or inability to explain this fact. Then, the fact of a doctrine of free will in the Ethics calls for brief attention, followed by a discussion of the good for man, the end of human life on which morality must ultimately depend. The chapter will conclude by presenting those general principles of Aristotelian philosophy which underlie his concept of obligation and hence are implicit in it. Aristotle himself did not express these in the Ethics, but they are the framework on which the edifice is constructed; hence, they merit detailed attention.
CHAPTER II

PRESENTATION OF CERTAIN CONCEPTS FROM

THE NICHOMACHEAN ETHICS PREPARATORY

TO AN UNDERSTANDING OF ARISTOTLE’S

CONCEPT OF OBLIGATION

The concept of obligation which is embodied in the
Ethics demands an approach similar to that of a son approaching
his father for an advance on next week’s allowance. He does not
broach the topic directly; he has to “work up to it”. A certain
groundwork must first be laid. So it is with the present study.
First of all we have to prepare the ground, to present the several
pregnant concepts from which the concept of obligation can be
clearly deduced. We must “work up to it”. That is our business
now.

There will be, of course, precious little value to this
entire effort unless it can be demonstrated at the outset that
Aristotle did regard man as subject to some measure of obligation.
Indeed there will be precious little value to any moral system of
which this is not a basic part. The very fact that such a work
as the Nichomachean Ethics was composed at all certainly suggests
that the author had at least some conception of an element of obligation in the life of man. Whether or not this element could be explained is quite another question. But the all-pervading tone of the famed treatise plainly declares that the author desires to outline a philosophy of life which man somehow ought to follow. He surely desires to cut more deeply into the fabric of moral life than the mere setting forth of an elaborate system of etiquette — a Grecian forerunner to the modern Emily Post, whose decta will doubtless add to the luster of one's social polish, but scarcely more. Somehow, there are things man should do, ought to do, and others he ought not to do.

This point concerning the very presence of some idea of obligation in the Ethics is most of all evident when one reads along through its pages and senses the fundamental attitude animating them. Nevertheless, many particular passages can be adduced to substantiate this.

But it is by reason of pleasures and pains that men become bad . . . either the pleasures and pains they ought not or when they ought not or as they ought not or by going wrong in one of the other similar ways that may be distinguished. Not the mere presence of the term "ought" along, but the whole

1 Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics, trans. by W. D. Ross. See the Student's Oxford Aristotle, Vol. V, Ethics, Oxford University Press, New York, 1942. This is the text used throughout this study; hereafter it will be referred to merely by Book and chapter numbers as well as the Bekker number. Quotation above, II, 3, 1104b 21-24.
tone of those words "that men become bad" is considerably significant. The "bad", occurring so commonly in his pages, strikes the reader as indeed an odd word if some character of something—you-ought-to-avoid—does not attach thereto. The very idea of "bad" is drained of much if not all of its content unless "bad" for man signifies something he should not be or should not do—and the reverse, of course, will be said of the good; somehow it is something man should be or do. Clearly, the author is indicating the strange factor of oughtness in life.

Much of the same manner of observation can be passed on the following outspoken lines:

But not every action nor every passion admits of a mean; for some have names that already imply badness, e.g. spite, shamelessness, envy, and in the case of actions adultery, theft, murder; for all of these and suchlike things imply by their names that they are themselves bad, and not the excesses or deficiencies of them. It is not possible, then, ever to be right with regard to them; one must always be wrong ... Simply to do any of them is to go wrong ... Of the actions we have mentioned there is no mean nor any excess and deficiency, but however they are done they are wrong.²

Can any other impression be gathered from these lines than that their author was denouncing certain actions and states of mind that one ought to avoid? More than that; in this passage Aristotle speaks boldly, not hesitating to say that certain actions are evil intrinsically. If then, this be the lofty moral pinnacle on

² II, 6, 1107a 9-25.
which he will take his stand, he is unequivocally implying that man is bound to keep himself clear of these condemned acts, bound strictly, and bound always:

It appears throughout the entire text of the Ethics that the author wishes to confront his readers (or, originally, perhaps, his auditors) with the lines along which their obligations are to be met. His doctrine of virtue as a mean between the two extremes of excess and defect implies again and again that the middle state, the virtue, not only is desirable but often is a state which cannot be bypassed without blame accruing to the errant person for failing in an obligation.3

In treating of the virtue of temperance his underlying notions of obligation again shine through.

As the child should live according to the direction of his tutor, so the appetitive element should live according to rational principle. Hence the appetitive element in a temperate man should harmonize with the rational principle; for the noble is the mark at which both aim, and the temperate man craves for the things he ought, as he ought, and when he ought; and this is what rational principle directs.

The temperate man, then, is the one whose desires have been made to harmonize, and not to conflict, with the dictates of his reason. Yet, quite apparently to everyone's own experience and to Aristotle's as well, not all men possess this harmony within

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3 Cf. II, 9, 1109b 20-26. The doctrine of the mean is in Book II, and consistently throughout the Ethics.
4 III, 12, 1119b 14-20.
themselves. Thus it can be seen that this moral harmony is not inevitable in man, not spontaneous, not something automatic -- but it is nonetheless the state of character in which he ought to hold himself. He ought to be temperate.

The comments on temperance could be repeated relative to all the virtues although certainly the obligation involved will not be identical in every virtue. However, it will be worth while to inspect also his treatment of that fundamental virtue, justice. Of what possible utility is a discussion of justice if there be not something which I owe to another?

This, then, is what the just is -- the proportional; the unjust is what violates the proportion. Hence one term becomes too great, the other too small, as indeed happens in practice; for the man who acts unjustly has too much and the man who is unjustly treated too little, of what is good.

The above prompts the query: how are you to say that anyone has "too much" or "too little" unless you have some initial concept that somehow there is an amount that the one in question properly has, ought to have, and the superfluity becomes a point of injustice by going beyond this (implying, of course, that in injustice a superfluity means a simultaneous deprivation of what is owing to another person? Justice without obligation is simply not justice.

5 Bk V.
6 V, 3, 1131b 16-20.
It has already been noted that Aristotle holds that certain actions are evil intrinsically. In this matter of justice he consistently declares that there are some actions which can be described as intrinsically good -- he takes the term natural justice.

Of political justice part is natural, part legal, -- natural that which everywhere has the same force and does not exist by people's thinking this or that; ... there is something that is just even by nature ... The things which are just not by nature but by human enactment are not everywhere the same, since constitutions also are not the same, though there is but one which is everywhere by nature the best.

He is telling his reader that according to man's set, established nature there are ways in which he will always find himself obliged. How can this be so? When exactly is this doctrine to be applied? Is he able to explain it? These are not the questions at this point. We are now only interested in ascertaining the simple fact that Aristotle did recognize obligation as a part (necessarily a basic part) of moral life. -- At a later point will be taken up his vastly significant concept of the end of human life, and then we establish from that concept the degree of binding power which the end wields within the soul of man. For now, the mere fact of some obligation suffices.

On the specific point under discussion it is even more

7 See above, page 12.
8 V, 5, 1134b 18 - 1135a 4.
difficult to find the noted students of Aristotle, the scholars who fine-comb his works and gravely unfold to us their inner meanings -- to find them speaking explicitly of the element of obligation in his ethical work. Rather, they reasonably follow his own example and simply take the whole matter for granted. Aristotle is dealing with some degree of obligation here -- how else are we to explain the work? This appears to be the common sentiment of his scholars. Of course, some few do comment on the character or quality of his concept of obligation, but that will take our attention in a later section of this study.

In this present section expounding certain concepts from the Ethics which are essential as groundwork for an understanding of his obligation, it would be well to point out next a few of the comments the great philosopher himself has passed on liberty of the will. His general position on this poses little difficulty. Again, controversy may enter in determining details, even important details, in his doctrine, but the main fact stands untouched.

On the whole, then, Aristotle is neither a determinist nor a libertarian. It is hard to know how much to stress his view that there is a real indeterminacy in things--he had not full insight into the problem--but at his best he interprets freedom as self determination.9

The text of the *Ethics* has many, very many, passages presuming a doctrine of free will. Moreover, such a doctrine is only consistent with the fact of obligation as discussed above. Duty without free will is a squared-circle, morally. For example, there is an extended discussion treating the distinction he wishes to place between the "voluntary" and the "involuntary", followed by an exposition of choice. However, it is necessary to note that his usage of "voluntary" is somewhat ambiguous, for it is more commonly used among philosophers to signify the quality of an act as merely flowing from the volitional faculty but not necessarily implying the further note of free operation or self-determination. Nevertheless in this section he uses the term with the further significance of self-determination, as is clear from the context since, for example, in the following, "praise and blame" are not bestowed on mere will acts simply because of their psychological character as such, but rather because they are elicited freely.

Since virtue is concerned with passions and actions, and on voluntary passions and actions praise and blame are bestowed, on those that are involuntary pardon, and sometimes also pity, to distinguish the voluntary and the involuntary is presumably necessary for those who are studying the nature of virtue, and useful also for legislators with a view to the assigning both of honours and of punishments.

The study of the "voluntary" would hardly be of use to legislators

10 III, 1-5

11 III, 1, 1109b 30-34.
unless the term is here taken to refer to the will when it is self-determining, i.e. free. — The whole section is replete with open statements grounded on a doctrine of free will, of which the following is only typical (displaying, however, the same usage of "voluntary"): 

The end, then, being what we wish for, the means what we deliberate about and choose, actions concerning means must be according to choice and voluntary. Now the exercise of the virtue also is in our own power, and so too vice. For where it is in our power to act it is also in our power not to act, and vice versa.2

Very conveniently for the present study he goes on to tie in the connection which this doctrine has with the responsibility incurred by failure to do what we ought to have done and could have done.

And we punish those who are ignorant of anything in the laws that they ought to know and that is not difficult, and so too in the case of anything else that they are thought to be ignorant of through carelessness; we assume that it is in their power not to be ignorant, since they have the power of taking care.

But perhaps a man is the kind of man not to take care. Still they are themselves by their slack lives responsible for becoming men of that kind, and men make themselves responsible for being unjust or self-indulgent.13

If a person is to be held responsible for what he does and what he does not, three conditions must be fulfilled: (1) he must not be acting under compulsion, (2) he must have some knowledge of the circumstances, and (3) it must be performed by

12 III, 5, 1113b 3-8.

13 III, 5, 1113b 34-1114a 5.
choice. These imply a free will, some moral awareness or sensitivity, deliberation, and, of course, choice.

It is interesting to note in passing that Aristotle pushed his doctrine of free will and consequent responsibility to the very extremes of human life:

On some actions praise indeed is not bestowed, but pardon is, when one does what he ought not under pressure which overstrains human nature and which no one could withstand. But some acts, perhaps, we cannot be forced to do, but ought rather to face death after the most fearful sufferings.

His position on the basic fact of obligation and free will, set down in the preceding pages, is indicated in the following:

Thus Aristotle holds a man to be responsible for his ignorance of general principles and for non-application or temporary obscuration of principles of good conduct; ... Thus a man is responsible for mistakes done under the influence of drink or passion, because it is possible for him not to pass into such states; similarly, he is responsible for acts which result from his vicious character; those acts alone are called involuntary in which the agent's character is not the cause of the act.

Man has freedom of will; he is responsible for his choices because of his freedom. He is blamed for some choices, praised for others because men in general realize that his liberty is not mere unbounded license, but is clearly faced with actions he ought

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14 III, c 1, 2.
15 III, 1, 1110a 24-28.
On the existence of a doctrine of free will in Aristotle the noted scholar, Ross, comments:

It has often been complained that the psychology of Plato and Aristotle has no distinct conception of the will. Aristotle's doctrine of choice is clearly an attempt to formulate such a conception. Some of the features of his doctrine are a great advance on any previous thought on the subject. 17

On the whole we must say that he shared the plain man's belief in free will but that he did not examine the problem very thoroughly and did not express himself with perfect consistency. 18

Although he was one of the paramount metaphysicians in the long history of philosophy, nevertheless it was only in somewhat later times that the metaphysical difficulties in certain crucial doctrines such as the freedom of the will were perceived, opened, and probed.

Aristotle presupposes quite arbitrarily the freedom of the will and attempts to prove it by the fact that virtue is voluntary and that we are universally held accountable for our actions. . . . We find in Aristotle no closer examinations of the internal processes which result in acts of will nor into the possibility and limits of freedom of the will. 19

By way of brief summary, then, it is to be considered


18 Ibid., 201.

that the Ethics presents clear textual evidence that its author recognized human nature as somehow an obliged nature, regardless of whether or not the Ethics advances any explanation of this basic fact. Secondly, his doctrine of free will is patent in its fundamental assertion -- and it is indispensable if man is to have any true moral life and not merely a physical, animal existence. Free will and obligation are companions inevitably. -- The present study, however, has obligation for its focal point.

Moving on, then, another point of great importance in the Ethics and in the question of obligation is the end of human life. This receives its primary importance from the fact that one must first of all see the author's view of human life in general, and its broad outline, before he can reasonably proceed to investigate any part of it.

When Aristotle decides to inquire concerning the fundamental nature of human life, he must first discover some method of investigation which will lead him to the heart of human life, to that central point from which all subsequent questions can be answered. Such a method he finds incisively by posing the problem, "What is the end of human life?" This, cutting to the essence of the subject, sets the standard for an intellectual study of the morality of human conduct. It is all-important. Unless there be this teleological approach to human life the student can only flounder in any questions of real morality and of
and of the stern "ought" involved in it. In thus commencing his study of human life Aristotle followed a philosophic instinct of the highest order. It was to point out a path which Scholastic philosophers still follow; however, it has been one of the cardinal aberrations of much modern philosophy to ignore, misconceive, or altogether deny the teleological character of all being. From this regrettable situation has flowed much of the chaotic arbitrariness in today's so-called philosophy.

It will be well briefly to reinforce this basic notion of the vital importance of the end, or finality, in a study of obligation. Any necessity is precisely necessary because first some end is necessary, and then the means to it receive their character of necessity by simple participation in the necessity of the end. This is true in physical necessity as well as in moral necessity. And moral necessity is obligation.

Determination, then, in the actions of an indetermined agent -- or moral necessity, is a matter of finality, of end. This is not a peculiarity of moral necessity, it is a common note of all necessity; the peculiarity of moral necessity is that it is exclusively a matter of finality, strictly ruling out the formal, material, and efficient causes as its sources. As a result of this common note of finality in necessity there is an intimate bond of union in the necessity of all nature. All the acts in all of nature are called into being by an end or goal, for action in its essential notion means no more than movement to an end or possession of an end . . . That man should be subjected to this universal necessity of nature is demanded by his place in nature. He is not above nature nor below it, he is in it . . . Moral necessity, then, like all necessity in nature is closely linked up with the order to an end . . . To state that this act is obligatory is to declare that this act
Hence, in an investigation of his concept of obligation it will be essential that, first attention be given to the end which Aristotle set up for human life, and so for morality.

At the outset he states that there must be some ultimate goal to life; moreover, this goal, as the ultimate goal, must also be the ultimate good.

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. . . . If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else. . . . clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life?21

And in dutiful chorus the master's disciples reply, "indeed, a great influence on life". It is well to take note of certain later sections of the book where the author shows that he is fully aware of the importance of the end, if one is to understand the moral character of life and the oughtness involved therein.

The origin of action -- its efficient, not its final cause -- is choice, and that of choice is desire and reasoning with end in view. This is why choice cannot exist either without reason and intellect or without a moral state.22

20 Farrell, "The Roots of Obligation", 22-4. -- On finality as the bond of union in necessity Farrell here cites St. Thomas, Summa Theol., I-II, 91, 3; 93, 1 et 6; 1, 1 et 8.

21 I, 1, 1094a 1-24.

22 VI, 2, 1139a 31-33.
For the originating causes of the things that are done consist in the end at which they are aimed; but the man who has been ruined by pleasure or pain forthwith fails to see any such originating cause — to see that for the sake of this or because of this he ought to choose and do whatever he chooses and does. 23

Now, the chief good must be final; it must be something sought for its own sake, and not as a means to something other. It is an object of choice in itself for itself.

Now such a thing as happiness, above all else, is held to be for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else, but honour, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness. . . . Happiness . . . no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself. 24

Happiness, the supreme good, the ultimate end! But this fails to settle the problem in our minds, for spontaneously a second bobs to the surface: What is happiness? It appears that the philosopher's work, like the proverbial housewife's, is never done.

What is happiness? In what does it consist? "This might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function of man." 25 What does man do as man? What is his proper function? Oh, to be sure, he does many things, but what does he specifically do that sets him apart from other beings, from other living

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23 VI, 5, 1104b 16-19.
24 I, 7, 1097b 1-7; also X, 6, 1176b 32.
25 I, 7, 1097b, 24.
things? Can I evaluate the efforts of a sculptor, say, if I do not first know what it is that a sculptor does? Can I distinguish the diving champion from crude beginners unless I first know what a diver does and aims to do, as a diver? Hardly. And such is the line of reasoning Aristotle pursues. What does man do, as man?

Since nutrition and growth and sensation are elements of life which man shares commonly with plant and animal life, only the rational principle remains by which we may distinguish the human from the non-human. If happiness is man's chief good, then it will somehow pertain to that which is peculiar to man, to his rational principle, to reason. Reason is man's specific perfection (and his specific function will flow from that -- i.e. be determined by his specific perfection). "Reason is the best thing in us".  

A man is said to have or not to have self-control according as his reason has or has not the control, on the assumption that this is the man himself; and the things men have done on a rational principle are thought most properly their own acts and voluntary acts. That this is the man himself, then or is so more than anything else, is plain.  

We are now prepared to accept a fuller description of happiness. It is a state which is attained by and characterized by the practice of virtue; virtue is a state of character (and also its proper exercise) in accordance with man's specific

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26 X, 7, 1177a 20.  
27 II, 5, 1168b 33-37  
28 II, 5 & 6 1106a 10; also, 1106a 23.
perfection, which is reason. Hence, rational activity is productive of virtue and exercises virtue; it is no less than the highroad to happiness! Happiness, life's crown, "the prize and end of virtue"!29

The focus has become less blurred, yet still it is somewhat hazy. Man has an ultimate end and supreme good: happiness; and the state of happiness is reached and marked by virtue. And virtue results when man acts according to his specific perfection, reason. But we still have not been told precisely in what happiness consists. Of course, we cannot look for a concept more sharply focused than the nature of the subject will allow.30

But, nevertheless, it seems only reasonable to inquire just what manner of life, day by day, the happy man lives.

Aristotle declares that the happy life is the life of contemplation.31

But the activity of reason, which is contemplative, seems both to be superior in serious worth and to aim at no end beyond itself, and to have its pleasure proper to itself (and this augments the activity), and the self-sufficiency, leisureliness, unweariedness (so far as this is possible

29 I, 9, 1099b 17.
30 I, 3, 1094b 11.
31 X, 6, 1176a 30 to 1179a 32. - The relation of this Aristotelian concept of contemplation to the Christian concept of final beatitude properly lies beyond the scope of the present study but will be given some brief consideration later on.
Happiness extends, then, just so far as contemplation does, and those to whom contemplation more fully belongs are more truly happy, not as a mere concomitant but in virtue of the contemplation; for this is in itself precious. Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation.33

However, he points out that there will be some need for external prosperity to some degree, need for friends, wealth, even pleasing physical appearance. "Happiness seems to need this sort of prosperity in addition."34 It is a difficulty for the reader to decide to what degree these adjuncts are constitutive of happiness. Perhaps the author himself did not really know.

If the end of human life is to be realized in contemplation it seems only reasonable that the further question be posed; what does man contemplate in this lofty state of life? What is the object of his contemplation? Ross suggests an answer:

If it be asked what Aristotle means, in particular, by the contemplative life, the answer is that he means the contemplation of truth in two and perhaps in three departments, mathematics, metaphysics, and perhaps also natural philosophy. The happy life is not one of search for truth, but one of contemplation of truth already attained.35 It has been suggested that it is, for Aristotle, a life of aesthetic and religious as well as of scientific contemplation.
There is, however, nothing to show that aesthetic contemplation formed for Aristotle any part of the ideal life. . . . On the other hand, since the highest branch of contemplation is called by the name of theology, it is reasonably to suppose that this part of the contemplative life would have the character of worship proper to the contemplation of the divine nature.

It should be noted in regard to the foregoing notions that, for the most part, they are not explicitly discussed in the Ethics; however, they are briefly introduced here for the sake of further specifying the precise end to which human nature is obliged.

Our philosopher sets man's goal on a truly elevated plane to which the only pathway is a steep ascent. That pathway is to charted, and cleared, and paved by virtue. But, moreover, virtue is more than a mere means; it is at least partially constitutive of the end itself. Thus it is important not to overlook Aristotle's division of virtue into moral and intellectual. Moral is proper to the will, to the faculty of desire, and is the principal means to the end of life, happiness. Intellectual virtue, on the other hand, is proper to the reasoning faculty and is constitutive of the end itself. However, there does not appear to be a basis for driving this distinction to its extremes; for regardless of how he may care to distinguish them, the fact

36 Cf. Metaphysics, VI, 1, 1026a 19.
37 Ross, 234.
38 Moral virtue, II-V; intellectual virtue, VI; initial distinction, I, 13.
remains that the means to the end, in the case of happiness, inevitably partake of the nature of the end itself. You cannot arrive at a state of virtue, an end, unless you first practice the particular acts of virtue which lead to that state.

The virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. . . . It is from the same causes and by the same means that every virtue is both produced and destroyed . . . Thus in one word, states of character arise out of like activities. 39

Similar distinction is made in reason according to the different ends for which it operates: it is either practical or speculative. 40 It is well to note this since the operation of reason in the practical sense is but a means to the end of life, whereas the operation of speculative reason is constitutive of the end. This is so because the object of reason in the practical sense is that truth which corresponds to right desire, while the object of reason in the speculative sense is truth for its own sake, not as a means to some further end. Thus, it is reason in this latter sense that makes happiness, for it has as its very nature the contemplation of what is necessary and eternal: truth in itself. The distinction seen earlier between moral and intellectual virtue now assumes new meaning; moral virtue pertains to choice, and since choice involves deliberation (reasoning with a view to action), moral virtue is intrinsically related to

39 II, 1, 1103a 32-1103b 22.
40 VI, 1, 1139a 1-15.
practical reason. These are means to happiness. Intellectual virtue pertains to truth and falsity, not as related to choice or subsequent activity, but only in themselves. This clearly the realm of the speculative reason.

What affirmation and negation are in thinking, pursuit and avoidance are in desire; so that since moral virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, and choice is deliberate desire, therefore both the reasoning must be true and the desire right, if the choice is to be good, and the latter must pursue just what the former asserts. Now this kind of intellect and of truth is practical; of the intellect which is contemplative, not practical nor productive, the good and the bad state are truth and falsity respectively (for this is the work of everything intellectual); while of the part which is practical and intellectual the good state is truth in agreement with right desire. . . . The work of both the intellectual parts, then, is truth. Therefore the states that are most strictly those in respect of which each of these parts will reach truth are the virtues of the two parts.41

Once again Ross makes certain illuminating observations which prove helpful in establishing a somewhat more coherent alignment of the intertwined concepts of moral and intellectual virtue, happiness and contemplation.

It is clear that contemplation is for Aristotle the main ingredient in well-being (author's note; i.e. happiness); whether moral action is another ingredient in it or only a means to its production is not so evident. The doubt is not entirely removed in Book X. . . . The part assigned to the moral life . . . seems to be twofold. (1) It constitutes a secondary form of well-being, one which we are driven to fall back upon by the fact that we are not all reason and cannot live always on the level of the contemplative life. And (2) it helps to bring into being the higher kind. Aristotle says very little about how it does this.42

41 VI, 2, 1139a 22 - 1139b 14.
42 Ross, 233.
Moral virtue, then, is indeed the principal means to the supreme end of life, but it goes on to participate somewhat in the end, to be a "secondary form of well being" (happiness). It is a roadway that not only leads to the estate but also winds through it.

But in a secondary degree the life in accordance with the other kind of virtue (moral virtue) is happy; for the activities in accordance with this befit our human estate. And so it is not difficult to understand the statement that in the individual life . . . Aristotle thought of moral action as providing for the existence of intellectual activity by keeping in subjection the passions.

This study has spoken of contemplation and of speculative reason. It has been noted above that Ross points out that Aristotle's contemplation was to center on truth in mathematics, metaphysics, and possibly natural philosophy. These, of course, are fields of almost boundless extent. In certain passages he goes so far as to say that in entering into this state of contemplation a man makes himself like the gods. Let it be a point of consolation to all philosophers, great and small, that Aristotle has declared them "dearest to the gods". Indeed, this life of highest reason seems inclined to lift man beyond himself, to

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43 X, 8, 1178a 9-11.
44 Ross, 233.
45 See page 28 above.
46 X, 8, 1179a 30. The assertion quoted must have been, of course, a considerable boost to the author's self-esteem.
exercise a part of his nature which reaches out to overlap the bounds of this earthly existence.

But such a life (of contemplation) would be too high for man; for it is not insofar as he is man that he will live so, but insofar as something divine is present in him. . . . If reason is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life. . . . We must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us. 47

Is this an intimation, however veiled, that another, continued life may conceivably await man beyond death? Is man's soul immortal? Does the end, the goal, of life transcend this earthly career, in his philosophy? Such a view seems highly improbable, as the following suggests:

There may be a wish even for impossibles, e.g. for immortality. 48

Now death is the most terrible of all things; for it is the end, and nothing is thought to be any longer either good or bad for the dead. 49

And the more he is possessed of virtue in its entirety and the happier he is, the more he will be pained at the thought of death; for life is best worth living for such a man, and he is knowingly losing the greatest goods, and this is painful. 50

In another passage he indicates further that happiness is not pertinent to the dead since happiness is an activity. 51

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47 X, 8, 1179a 30.
48 III, 2, 1111b 23.
50 III, 9, 1117b 11.
51 I, 10, 1100a 13.
Elsewhere he mentions that a man does well who dies for friends and country inasmuch as it is better to live a more brief but noble life than to preserve one's existence at the cost of rejecting such noble sacrifice. But we note that mention whatsoever is made, no slightest hint, of any future recompense in a next life for one who acts in thus noble a manner.52

There seems then little evidence that Aristotle, despite his penetrating insight into human life, held a continued existence beyond death. Had he done so, surely it would have most considerably influenced his ethical thought, giving strength and substance in view of an unending end. His whole theory of obligation would have been altered. But such was not the case; and his concept of the end, of happiness, of contemplation, remain mundane throughout.

Human life, has, according to Aristotle, an end to which it tends, as has been seen; and human nature has a goal to which it is ordained. To know the end of a being is already to know very much about it; for science is knowledge through causes,53 and the final cause is the most basic and determining of the causes.54

52 IX, 8, 1169a 17.

53 Physics, I, 1, 184a 10; Post. Anal., I, 2, 71b 11-15; Metaphysics, V (A), 2 1013b 28-29.

54 Physics, II, 3, 195a 24-25; II, 7, 198b 2-5; II, 8, 199a 30-31; Metaphysics, I (A), 1, 981a 27-29.
cause of the other causes. The end which he lays down for man is happiness, and this consists in man's perfection. But since man has many perfections, it is necessary that his end be his specific perfection, which is the full flowering and realization of all the potentialities of his distinctive power, intelligence. A grasp of this point is essential for an understanding of his morality (Aristotle's) in general and of obligation in particular.

The line of reasoning which Aristotle employs is not something novel which he has devised that he might aptly resolve the special problems he would encounter in moral philosophy -- as though moral philosophy were an area apart from his other thought. It may be distinct but hardly separate. The Ethics is not a presentation of new principles, but is fundamentally an application of the common principles of Aristotelian thought.

The teleological character of morality is of vital importance, as was seen above. But why is it that here in the Ethics he calls upon a teleological concept or principle to resolve the present the present problems of the good for man? How does he decide upon that solution? Is it a fortuitous guess?

55 See above, pages 25-6.

56 See above, page 21. -- Christian and pagan ethics are alike in this respect, that both work within a basically teleological framework.
Does he simply happen upon it? Clearly, this could not be the case.

It is a basic principle of Aristotelian philosophy that the perfection of a being is to be found in the realization of its proper end.57 The end of every being is simply that it should become fully itself; all that is merely potential in a being should be, as far as possible, subjected and vanquished in the interest of the actual. This, then, is the being's task, that it come fully to be what it essentially is. Its perfection is to realize itself, to draw itself out, to unfold itself, to make itself be actually more and more unto the uttermost limits of its capacity. This, of course, is primarily a metaphysical, not a moral doctrine, rooted as it is in the nature of act and potency. For what is potency but a capacity for some perfection not yet had, a perfection which is realized fully only in the fullest possible actualization of that potency? Every potency has a definite, positive ordination to its corresponding act. It is the basic nature of a potency that it is in ordination and decidedly tends to something which it is not yet. Its perfection consists in becoming that to which it now only tends. The perfection of any being is attained by the reduction of its potency to act,

57 This doctrine is not explicitly discussed at length in any one place in Aristotle, but is touched on in various places, e.g. Metaphysics, IX (10), 1050a 8-10, and 1050b 22, both stating that actuality is the end, and form is actuality.
more and more and more. 58

When potency and act are studied in the roles of matter and form, the theory remains unaltered. Matter is potency, form is act. Matter is the element to be determined, form, the determining. And the perfection of the being resides in the fullest possible realization or actualization of its form. In moral philosophy, the project is to apply these principles to man and his moral career.

If . . . we take an object and abstract from it everything that is merely rudimentary and only on its way to completion and if we think of the end of its growth as fully attained, we obtain the pure and complete realization of its conception, to which nothing formless, no matter that is still unformed, any longer attaches. The form, or intelligible essence of a thing, corresponds with its perfect realization, and form in general with actuality. 59

It is implicit in the foregoing observations that the form is not formal cause only, but also final cause! The end of being is immanent, indwelling, in the being itself, i.e. in the being's form. A being achieves its end in proportion as its form is, so to speak, manifested and realized. This is a doctrine of fundamental importance here, that "the nature is the end or 'that for the sake of which'". 60 In the Physics, developing his phil-

58 **Metaphysics, IX (C), 8, 1049b 4 - 1050b 2.**

59 Zeller, Aristotle and the Earlier Peripatetics, I, 348. This excellent chapter provides abundant references to all Aristotelian works in which his metaphysical thought is found.

60 **Physics, II. 2, 194a 27-32.**
osophy of nature and asking if nature acts for an end, he states:

Now the principles which cause motion in a physical way are two, of which one is not physical, as it has no principle of motion in itself. Of this kind is whatever causes movement, not being moved, such as (1) that which is completely unchangeable, the primary reality, and (2) the essence of that which is coming to be, i.e. the form; for this is the end or 'that for the sake of which'.61

A passage frequently cited on this point is in the Metaphysics where he is speaking of the need for giving all the causes when one inquires into the cause of something. Using man as his example, he says, "The formal cause? His essence. The final cause? His end. But perhaps the latter two are the same."62 On the Generation of Animals speaks of the four causes and, in reference to the final and formal causes (the latter of which is called: "the definition of its essence") he remarks that "these two we may regard pretty much as one and the same."63 Another time he tells us that one may consider "nature as essence including both the motor cause and the final cause."64

Another interesting passage on this same point is to be found in the Politics:

And the nature of a thing is its end. For what each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature whether we are

61 Ibid., II, 7, 198b 1-3.
62 Metaphysics, VIII, 4, 1044a 35-37.
63 Gen. Animals, I, 1, 715a 3-5.
64 Parts of Animals, I, 1, 641a 27.
speaking of a man, a horse, or a family. Besides, the final cause and end of a thing is the best, and to be self-sufficient is the end and the best.65

Commenting on the doctrine, Zeller formulates a precise statement of it:

The form is not merely the concept and the essence of each thing but also its final end and the force which realizes this end.66

If we ask how the form is perfected in man the only reply is that it is the whole tenor the Ethics that the virtues bring about the perfection of the form. The virtue is a habit, a stable accidental quality, inhering in the substance and perfecting it, the rational soul. "We ... are made perfect by habit"67 by habits deliberately formed, not by some spontaneous process of nature.

In the case of man, then, it will be all-important to establish what his form is; for in ascertaining this the following shall have been, so to speak, isolated: (1) his essence, (2) the source and subject of his perfection, and (3) the final cause of his existence in general and his moral life in particular!

In viewing Aristotle's philosophical procedure of

65 Politics, I, 2, 1252b 30-35.

66 Zeller, Outlines, 175. Zeller translates the Greek "species" (εἶδος) as "concept", and ωὐσία as "essence" which can also be translated as substance.

67 II, 1, 1103a 24.
discovering the supreme good and the end for man, it was seen that he found it necessary to determine what a man, as man, does, and what his specific perfection and function is. Having eliminated nutrition, growth, and sense perception because held in common with sub-human forms of life, he goes on to establish that the human soul, a rational principle, is man's distinguishing perfection, and his function as man is that activity of soul properly consequent upon the same rational principle. 68 Thus the soul, the rational principle, stands forth as the form, the actual, the determining element in human nature.

In analysing conceptions into their two elements, Aristotle attributes to the genus an significance the same as matter, while he identifies the specific difference with the form. Similarly in the scheme of the universe, in physiology, in zoology, in psychology, . . . the soul and the body, 69 the male and the female, the active and the passive reason, stand to one another in the same relation as the form and the matter. The same is true, it need hardly be remarked, of potentiality and actuality. 70

Reason is the true essence of man. 71 The life of man, therefore, centers about reason; it is his crucial capacity -- all else depends on how well and to what degree reason is realized!

68 I, 7, 1097b 22-1098a 18.
69 De Anima, II, 1, 412b 9 sq c., 414a 13 II, 2, sq and often.
70 Zeller, Aristotle and the Earlier Peripatetics, I, 353.
71 Zeller, II, 145.
In the case of man it is well to point out that although the soul is form — and therefore — actuality — at the same time, in some respect, it can be said to be like matter, potentiality. Properly, of course, it is not matter. But this manner of speaking is of some convenience when one notes that the rational being has the task, so to speak, of developing itself rationally. It is now rational by nature, but its perfection will be realized only if it employs its faculties in activities according to the directives issued by the rational principle. Thus, from one aspect the soul is seen in its proper role as form; from another aspect its role exhibits some similarity to matter. This is a natural duality — if so it may be truly termed — and in no wise contradictory, for the two aspects are clearly complementary. This dualism in the moral sphere of the soul's life is in keeping with Aristotle's basic doctrine of act and potency.

Potency means (1) a source of movement or change, which is in another thing than the thing moved or in the same thing qua other.72

A potency of being acted on, i.e. the originative source, in the very thing acted on, of its being passively changed by another thing or by itself qua other, — These are in keeping with the doctrine.73

For in all that man does it is, ultimately, his own good that he

72 Metaphysics, V (Δ), 1019a 15; italics not in orig.

73 Ibid., IX (§) 1, 1046a 12. -- All this provides excellent exemplification that Aristotle's moral philosophy is firmly founded in his metaphysics.
has in mind, happiness in one form or other. Thus, in all that he does he is, in a certain sense, both agent and recipient.

Aristotle's ethical thought is indebted to his metaphysical principles for its foundation. Human nature has certain peculiarities of its own; but, albeit human, it is still nature and fundamentally is subject to the same principles as the rest of nature. To the philosopher, then, the problem is not to conceive a new set of principles but rather to apply those already established. This is what we are witnessing here.

In the famed *De Anima* he applies his metaphysical principles to psychological problems; on the applications and solutions thus formulated much of his ethical thought depends. It is, of course, in the applications that the productivity and profundity of the principles is revealed.

Aristotle in his scientific account of the soul does not give any definite statement about the good for man. Nevertheless, from his psychological principles, it is possible to trace certain lines of thought which will influence the development of an ethical theory. The chief principles in the *De Anima* which will affect the account of the good are: (1) the theory of the unity of body and soul; (2) the conception of the soul as the final cause, the purpose and the end of man; (3) the nature of the human soul as including a plant and animal soul, but at the same time altering this so that it becomes a unified rational soul; and (4) the analysis of motion and action . . . These lead up to the conception of the good for man as an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue.74

74 Spicer, 137.
It has been pointed out that Aristotelian principles present the form as the final cause. When applied to man the result then is that the soul will provide the end of man's specifically human activity; the good for man will consist in the developing or perfecting of his soul. The supreme good of the soul will be the supreme good and ultimate end for man.

Furthermore, man has but one soul although this one includes several functions. Among the lower functions are those which man has in common with sub-human life, nutrition, growth, perception; the function of reason surpasses and crowns all these. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that the soul remains one. Therefore, among these functions there exists a hierarchy in which the lower must be subordinate to the higher, and the supreme good will consist in whatever is best for the highest of the varied functions. Moreover, harmony will be achieved only if this principle be adopted even as guide in the most practical affairs of everyday living; the right action will ever be the reasonable action! Appetite has a master to whose domination it should be submitted rigorously.75 The will may be free, and is so, but it owes obedience to the higher (and highest) faculty, reason, as all in nature which is lower is dominated by what is higher. Thus, we can well understand why Aristotle holds that the

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75 III, 12, 1119b 14-20; of page 13 above; also IX, 8, 1168b 33-37; of page 25 above.
bad man cannot but be subject to interior unrest, conflict, and struggle. He speaks of "the man who has been ruined by pleasure or pain", and as a result no longer even knows what the end of life is. The proper harmony has been broken. Reason's role has been usurped. He goes so far as to declare that vice will "destroy the first principle" in a man, i.e., blind him utterly to the true nature and end of life.77

The incontinent man, knowing what he does to be bad, does it as a result of passion, while the continent man, knowing that his appetites are bad, refuses on account of his rational principle to follow them.78

The interior hierarchy is all-important in his moral philosophy; the superior principle is to be obeyed, just "as the child should live according to the direction of his tutor".79 This is fundamental in the Ethics.

Further doctrinal relationships between the Ethics and the De Anima indicate that his moral philosophy was intimately related to his broad philosophy of nature. Hence, it will

76 VI, 7, 1140b 18; also, cf VII, 6, 1149b 25-1150a 8.
77 VII, 8, 1151a 15; also, cf IX, 4, 1166a 13-1168b 19.
78 VII, 1, 1145b 12-15.
79 III, 12, 1119b; also 1168b 33-37 quoted above p 25.

be seen presently that obligation is founded on being, on man’s basic nature, as Spicer notes very neatly:

In this general account of the nature of the good it is possible to trace the influence of the De Anima. Happiness does not consist in what a man has or receives, but in what he is and does. Aristotle gives a new meaning to eudaimonia, and shows that it is not a condition of passivity but an active function. This is in harmony with his theory in the De Anima, that it is in activity that a function finds its true meaning. . . . But the Ethics adds new worth to the conception of the soul as developed in the De Anima. It shows that man is not only a rational being, but also a moral agent who is capable of ordering his own way of living and who has in him the power to appreciate moral values.81

Ethical thought, then, follows the principles of metaphysical and psychological thought. Problems of morality are fundamentally still problems of being. And man is part of nature; the laws which govern his existence and activity, even into the unique realm of the "ought" in his nature, will be only the same laws which regulate the rest of nature.

Man, like all the rest of nature, is occupied with the effort to achieve, defend and sustain the form which is the law of his being.82

Virtue according to Aristotle has its roots in nature . . . The excellence of life which morality seeks is . . . founded on the very essence of our being. Whatever is unnatural in human life and conduct is, in fact, evil, and whatever is genuinely good is in conformity with human character.83

81 Spicer, 145-6.


With our background material thus presented, the focus of the present study may now come to center directly on Aristotle's concept of obligation itself.
CHAPTER III

PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF OBLIGATION IN THE ETHICS

Now that the way has been prepared, the analysis of the concept of obligation which has been embodied in the Nichomachean Ethics, reflecting the mind of its immortal author, can be undertaken. It will bear repetition that this concept is only implicit in the Ethics; it is not stated outright, not discussed, not proven, not in any way analyzed. It is taken for granted. Aristotle seems not to have regarded it as a problem at all—he very probably considered that morality, with its rightness and wrongness and obligatory element, is as natural, as utterly inevitable to man as the very life of his body. "If you wish to challenge your own lively existence," he might well say, "then that is your concern, and your efforts will soon becircumstanced with the peace of an institution cell in which abundant leisure will facilitate your eccentric science. As for myself, I find it acceptable as such; I decline to challenge it. And, equivalently, I would not have written such a work as my Ethics had I felt that its fundamental proposition itself, a moral and obliged life as natural to man, were open to reasonable suspicion."—So the great man proceeded to his worthy task, winning an unending success, acclaimed
by Scholastic luminaries of medieval times, and subjected to scholarly analysis as late as this 1950.

Since, then, his line of thought on obligation is left only implicit, we must persist in the approach we have begun, namely, that of determining just what quality and what degree of obligation he could consistently predicate of human conduct in view of the great, main principles of Aristotelian philosophy which are applied to moral problems in the Ethics. It should finally be noted as well that, as he himself left the matter largely unsaid, so his various scholars have reasonably done likewise for the most part.

Now man, it is obvious, is part of nature. He is somewhat different from that life which is purely animal, just as the animal somewhat differs from the life of the plant, and so on. But man stands as part of nature; man is, so is subject to the same elementary laws which essentially permeate everything that is, that has being.

It has been seen that one of the primary principles of being is that form is also final cause.¹ Since the rational soul is the form of man, it is the rational soul which is in some way his end, his final goal, as well. Happiness then, which all agree

¹ See page 36 above
is man's ultimate goal, must be, one may say, rationality perfected; it must be the perfectly, completely, supremely reasonable state.

If nature equips each being with a form (and it is clearly inconceivable that it could be otherwise), then at one and the same time nature sets a goal toward which that being must necessarily tend. With the form the end is fixed, set. It will be the ordinary course of nature that each being's activity will necessarily carry it along the lines set down by its very nature, lines conducive to the end which accords with and corresponds to the form. The Scholastics have given this truth simple formulation in the classic dictum, *operatio sequitur esse*, or *operari sequitur esse*. This is the ordinary course of nature; this is the natural.

When one comes to man, the situation takes on a new aspect. Man is equipped by nature (such is the term acceptable to those whose philosophy does not include the notion of a Creator and creation) with the startling, almost anarchical power of will, free will. This, of course, follows upon the endowment of rationality. With the liberty of will goes the potentiality of

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2 See page 25 above.
3 See pages 17-21 above
4 See page 24 above, note 22.
choosing an action, course of actions, or even a whole lifetime which fails to bring the person to the end fixed by nature. For with his form as man, goes the consequent and utterly inevitable establishment of an end at which man is, so to speak, aimed. Though he has free will, man has no choice whatsoever in the end which is consequent upon his very nature. All men have the same nature, differing only numerically.

Consider the situation of very frequent occurrence in which a man employs his liberty of choice to elect an action which diverts him from the course leading to his end. It has already been noted that Aristotle over and over again terms such an action as "bad, wrong, to be avoided. If it is asked, why bad? the response is, obviously, bad because it diverts from the true goal of life. And that brings this study squarely to a crucial question: is the end of life, for Aristotle, a necessary end? If there is no necessary end, then there can be no means necessary to the achieving of that end; for the means can be necessary only by participation in the necessity of the end. Is the Aristotelian

5 This point will be developed more fully on a subsequent page.

6 See page 12 above.

7 Cf. Metaphysics, IV (Γ), 5, 1015a 20-26 where Aristotle notes that any conditions "without which good cannot be or come to be, or without which we cannot get rid of evil" are called necessary. The notion recurs briefly in the passage immediately following this quotation.
end an end which man must choose or be subject to definitive
classification as a failure? Or is man free to pursue it or ig-
nore it according to his own desire? After all, as many a pagan
must have argued, what else could free will have as its purpose
in man other than to endow him with the liberty of total license:
"fashion your own life completely; it is all up to you; nature
has given you a free will and in so doing has ordered you to be
your own master!"

There are two principal answers to be set against these
notions. The first is strictly textual: there is no evidence
whatsoever in the Ethics that Aristotle looked upon the end of
human life as a subject for each one's whim. Moreover, there
is considerable evidence directly contradicting this view, indi-
cating that the end for man is an end for human nature as such
and hence for every individual being participating in that nature
of happiness as final end he comments: "for it is for the sake of
this that we all do all that we do."8 Here he is explicit in say-
ing that we all do our actions for the sake of this end.--The en-
tire philosophical quest for the supreme good and final end in the
Ethics takes for granted that the subject is man, not only some
particular man or particular group of men. He speaks of the
"good for man"9 and the "function of man."10 This is terminology

8 1,9, 1102a 3
9 1,3, 1094b 6
10 1,5, 1097b 25
of universality. It should also be noted that the extensive discussion of virtue clearly implies throughout that he is measuring and classifying habits according to a constant nature for man on the one hand, and a constant end for man, all men, on the other. Indeed, without such a fundamental presupposition, a discussion of this sort would be the sheerest confusion.

The second reason or answer which is to be given to the objections posed is one which has been indicated previously. Since Aristotle's metaphysics posits the form also as end, then man by virtue of his form has a corresponding end set for him. This will inevitably be true for each and every man, a solid fact set beyond the reach of any whim or choice of his own devising. Since man's will, though free, is a faculty rooted in the same soul which has this simultaneous character of final cause, it could not be employed in such a manner as to set a cleavage within the fundamental nature of the being itself. Man's arduous splitting of the elusive atom would be a lark compared to such a metaphysical concussion as this.

The end is an end for all men; it is for human nature as such. This is every man's goal whether he cares to add his voluntary consent or not; nature will be as little flattered by

11 Books 2-6, incl.
12 See page 36 above.
his decision as would be a brilliant prima donna offered a wilted posy for her masterful art.

If nature sets man's very being and sets the end at which he must tend inevitably, then it is an inescapable corollary that the faculty of will is to be employed in a manner harmonizing and not conflicting with the nature and the end thus established. 13 The element of obligation thereby appears in the moral life of man. Man, as part of nature, though a free part so to speak, ought to use that freedom to fulfill the natural pattern in which he finds himself set. Nature has given a degree of freedom to man, but it is not to be considered an irresponsible license; the freedom in no way exiles man from the great main pattern of being and activity and end. The freedom, as part of nature, ought to be used as a cooperating factor in nature, not to the contrary. 14

Man's physical nature is circumscribed, permeated wholly with laws over which he has no direct control and only slight indirect management. 15 He can never change them. He cannot order

13 See pages 40-41 above.

14 De Anima, III, 10, esp. 433a 15-32 notes that the will, as intellectual appetite, has an end intimately related to the intellect's end.

15 He frequently mentions (e.g. I,7,1097b 33) that man's nature includes the life of nutrition and growth of the plants and animals (and perception), but that the rational element is the distinguishing, specifying element.
a cessation of the flow of blood in his veins; he cannot command the various stages of digestion to occur in different sequence this time, just for variety; he cannot even stop the hair of his head from changing its hue! These, and countless others, progress with a physical necessity. They are ineluctable means to continuing the process of life; they operate by natural, physical impulses embodied in them, impelling and guiding them to perform the tasks assigned to them.

Man's moral nature is otherwise. With reason which can perceive the good, and a will which can desire the good intellectually perceived, man is left by nature to elect the means conducive to that supreme good perceptible to and flowing from his rational nature. This is his obligation; this is what, in general, he ought to do. His nature is not in this respect physically set and determined, but nature nonetheless retains a claim to cooperative, moral (i.e. teleological) conduct from man. It is a moral necessity in him consequent upon the fact that his nature is immutably fixed in relation to an end; man's will is part of his nature, and so is burdened with the duty of electing those actions which the intellect points out as being consonant with the man's nature and hence with his ultimate end as well. But although the will is indeed burdened with this duty, it remains a free faculty fundamentally. But this duty is just as much a part of its nature as its freedom is!-It will be of passing interest here to inspect
again certain lines quoted above\(^\text{16}\) to the effect that for Aristotle virtue is rooted in nature and morality is the purposeful quest for our supreme good and end "founded on the very essence of our being." From this it follows that whatever is truly natural is good, while evil is the unnatural.

A Christian ethician has presented this line of thought admirably in the following lines:

The path of activity proper and congenial to every being is fixed and dictated by the nature which the being possesses. The cosmic order which pervades all the non-human universe is predetermined in the natures of the innumerable variety of things which make up the universe. For man, too, the course of action proper to him is indicated by the constitution of his nature. A great part of his activity is, like the entire movements of the non-human world, under the iron grip of determinism; there are large classes of vital functions over which he has no volitional control; and his body is subject to the physical laws of matter. But, unlike all the lower world, he is himself the master of his actions over a wide range of life which we know as conduct. He is free to choose between two opposite courses; he can elect, in circumstances innumerable, to do or not to do... Does, then, his nature furnish no index for conduct? Is every form of conduct equally congenial and equally indifferent to human nature? By no means. His nature indicates the line of action which is proper, and the line which is abhorrent to it.\(^\text{17}\)

Although the above is drawn from a Christian source, and agrees with Aristotle's line of thought, it would be somewhat less than accurate to conclude that the pagan and the Christian concept of

\[\text{16} \] See above, page 42, note 65, Warbeke.

obligation coincide; for to the Christian (waiving the problem of a Christian philosophy as irrelevant here) "nature" is a far more pregnant term than ever it can be to a pagan. For, as will be indicated at greater length in the concluding chapter of this study, the very concept of nature has a richness and a profundity for the Christian which the pagan lords of intellect, however gifted, scarcely suspected. The very concept of nature, to the Christian, speaks, implicitly, of the Author of nature, the supreme Designer and Ordainer. The Christian does not, of course, hold to a view which would have the Creator and Ordainer an arbitrary power Whose mere whims, even when successively contradictory, would find full and permanent expression in the world about us -- for even He is bound by the very fundamentals of metaphysics. Even He is, so to speak, compelled to abide by the metaphysics of the universe, of the "nature" which He has freely determined to establish and retain in existence by His abiding concurrence. Even He, using the classic example, cannot square the circle, but, rather, can better be said to be able to do only those and all those things which in themselves are able to be done. --- Moreover, to the Christian, the rich concept of "nature" existing under the dominion of a personal Author gives a far more specific teleological character to all things, including human life and conduct, and obligation. Aristotle perceived the teleological character of being, and human conduct, but only vaguely and incompletely.
In commenting on the ethical thought of Aristotle

another author has written:

Aristotle wished to comprehend motion, development, becoming. To him, therefore, the essence, and the perfect expression of it in the individual, is also the telos, or end. The form is thus the efficient and the final cause at one and the same time. Applied to the domain of ethics, however, this means that pure being or the pure essential form is likewise the goal of becoming for the man. . . From the essential being results an oughtness for the individual man. In this way, from the content of the primary norm, "strive after the good," as it appears in the essential form of man. The supreme norm of morality is accordingly this: Realize your essential form, your nature. The natural is the ethical, and the essence is unchangeable.18

Man ought to realize his essential form; he ought to become truly and fully natural. Man is placed by nature in a very definite relation to an end; from this relation stems a claim placed upon his reason and his free will, a claim that he conduct himself to the proper end. This claim, indeed, can be ignored, but still it stands, real and objective, just as a contract violated remains nonetheless a contract.19

The same author quoted above, Rommen, gives further enunciation of the metaphysical basis of obligation which can be here adapted as expressing the same notions which underlie Aristotelian obligation (in fact, no Thomist, of course, is free of this Aristotelian influence, and Rommen is Thomistic).

The supreme principle of oughtness is simply this: Become

your essential being. For the rational, free nature of man this signifies: Act in accordance with reason; bring your essential being to completion; fulfill the order of being which you confront as a free creature.19

In a footnote to the immediately foregoing quotation, Rommen makes his already clear thought more clear.

In other words, man's basic and primary duty is to become (in fact, actually, fully, completely) what he is (in idea, potentially, germinally, essentially) through the consistent and persistent use of his reason and free will in the light and direction of his natural inclinations.20

It will be wise to note once more that the presence of thoughts herein quoted from a Christian source in no wise indicates the coincidence of complete Aristotelian doctrine on obligation with complete Scholastic doctrine, but rather only that element of it which, convenient for these present purposes, does coincide with Aristotle's unspoken, implicit position.

It has been seen then that Aristotle is consistent with the great fundamental principles of his philosophy when he presumes that man's nature is an obliged nature. It would have been interesting and highly instructive had he undertaken an explicit exposition and defense of his position, but he simply did not, and only analytical investigation of the matter can bring his thought to light.

19 Rommen, 178.

20 Ibid., note 2.
It is now established that human nature is an obliged nature for of the various reasons expounded in the pages preceding, man is obliged to bring about the perfection of his rationality in the fullest degree possible and, in so far as this shall have been achieved, to that extent shall man attain that state of contemplative living rooted in intellectual virtue, and consonant with moral virtue, which is the ultimate end of human life. This is happiness; to this, man is obliged.

But the further question immediately suggests itself; what are the concrete means which a man must elect to attain this end? Does not Aristotle tell us more specifically what a man's obligations are? It is as if a New Yorker were told merely to go westwards if he wishes to reach Los Angeles. "Many thanks," he might well reply, "but could you possibly be a little more specific? I shall need details if my journey is to be a success." In a somewhat similar vein, the reader questions Aristotle. But Aristotle is seemingly hesitant; on the general lines of morality he speaks with assurance—but in descending to particulars he frequently urges caution. The student should not expect an exactness from a science which exceeds its intrinsic capacities.

But this must be agreed upon beforehand, that the whole account of matters of conduct must be given in outline and not precisely, . . . that the accounts we demand must be in accordance with the subject-matter. . . . The general account being of this nature, the account of particular cases is yet more lacking in exactness; for they do not fall under any
art or precept but the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion, as happens also in the art of medicine or of navigation. 21

On many occasions he speaks similarly:

Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions. . . . We must be content. . . to indicate the truth roughly and in outline. . . for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits. 22

And the reader of the Ethics, searching for definitive statements committing the author to one or another position relative to specific obligations in human life, comes to realize that Aristotle carries out his own warnings. He does not push his study of the virtues to the point where he is prepared to say to his reader that this or that ought to be done and indeed must be done if the end of life is to be attained. As Ross notes, "he nowhere attempts to deduce the necessity of any single virtue from the supreme end to be attained." 23 Zeller makes a somewhat similar observation:

Seeing that he had investigated the idea of happiness, and had found in 'virtue' the essential means thereto, he might have made an attempt to define the various kinds of activity which enable us to reach this end, and so have sought to arrive at the main kinds of virtue. He does, however, nothing of the kind. 24

21 II, 2, 1104a 5-9.
23 Ross, 204.
24 Zeller, Peripatetica, II, 163.
It would, however, be incorrect to conclude that the Ethics affords no clue whatsoever to the mind of its author on this highly important point. There are several aspects of the work which will yield evidence helpful and convenient for the present inquiry.

First, it is a matter of much significance that Aristotle had some concept of certain actions being evil intrinsically. In some actions, he declares, there can be no application of his doctrine of the mean—they are always to be avoided, and so, it may then be concluded, here is a definite point of obligation. He mentions spite, envy, shamelessness, adultery, theft, murder.

For all of these and suchlike things... are themselves bad, and not the excesses or deficiencies of them. It is not possible, then, ever to be right with regard to them; one must always be wrong... Simply to do any of them is to go wrong... Of the actions we have mentioned there is no mean nor any excess and deficiency, but however they are done they are wrong.

He manifests this concept once again when he come to discuss justice, by pointing out that there is a form of justice which is "natural". It is that justice which everywhere has the same force and does not exist by people's thinking this or that;... there is something that is just even by nature... The things which are just not by nature but by human enactment are not everywhere the same.

25 See above, pages 13, 15-16.
26 II, 6, 1107a 8-25.
27 V, 7, 1134b 18. - 1135a 4.
Now it appears that the only possible basis upon which a doctrine of "natural justice" can be founded is a stable or constant nature (i.e., human) fixed in its relation to some end which it is morally bound to achieve. It is nothing subjective, for it "does not exist by people's thinking this or that". Human sentiments or opinions cannot alter its objective character; therefore, men are faced with obligation in its regard. It has "everywhere the same force (as fire burns both here and in Persia)". But the author does not proceed to favor his readers with specific examples of obligations arising from natural justice. He has told us that there are such, but he fails to enter into further details. However, reference can here be made to another passage studied above which throws some light on the inquiry at hand. There he tells us that "murder, theft, adultery" are never permissible; man has a permanent obligation to avoid these under penalty of failure to achieve his end.

Nor does goodness or badness with regard to such things depend on committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way, but simply to any of them is to go wrong.

Aristotle notes further that although his doctrine of the mean in virtue is generally true there are cases, as is now clear, when it is not applicable--and it is especially in these

28 V, 7, 1134b 27.
29 See note 24 above, page 24
30 II, 7, 1107a 15.
exceptions to his rule that one can discern the major points in the specifying of man's detailed obligation.

It would be equally absurd, then, to expect that in unjust, cowardly, and voluptuous action there should be a mean, an excess, and a deficiency; for at that rate there would be a mean of excess and of deficiency, an excess of excess, and a deficiency of deficiency. But . . . there is no excess and deficiency of temperance and courage because what is intermediate is in a sense an extreme. 31

In matters of temperance and courage, then, man faces elections of importance; for the unjust action, the cowardly and the voluptuous actions, are such that they are not to be permitted in any degree. They are areas of conduct into which a man ought not venture. On the contrary, those corresponding moral virtues are to be developed which are the necessary means of carrying man in the opposite direction, i.e., toward that lofty level of speculative activity supported by moral virtue which is the end of human life. If these virtues are not pursued and developed, a man's character suffers accordingly, possibly even to the extent of missing the end altogether.

This suggests a further point in the matter of specifying man's obligation, although this deduction also remains general (for that is the state in which the author himself leave it). Man must realize that actions develop the character--like actions develop like character, and this or that state of character is the

31 II, 7, 1107a 17-23.
principal determinant of human success or failure in respect to the end. Hence, it is clear that man is under obligation to regard certain states of character as proximate ends in life, ends which, when attained, assume the role of means carrying man on to the further, ultimate goal. The end is no longer quite so remote and obscure; it has been somewhat particularized by the indication of proximate ends subordinate and subservient to it. Can a man, then, attain the end if he does not first of all include, so to speak, within his character the habit of temperance, of courage, of justice, of reasonable self-restraint in the face of pleasure (for these are here selected not at random but from his own statements on intrinsic evil and natural justice32)? It seems that these are indispensable.

Now, these virtues which, in turn, give rise to the indispensable states of character do not come to us by nature.33 Nature endows us only with the potency for them, and for their contraries as well, and which of the potencies will be actualized and which will remain merely potential is a matter for choice on the part of the agent. Depending upon which path is followed, which quality of acts is chosen, a corresponding state of character will be developed carrying the agent toward or away from his

32 See above, pp. 24-25, esp. note28.
33 Ibid., II, 1, 1103a, 15-35.
supreme end.

By doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust. ... The same is true of appetites and feelings of anger; some men become temperate and good-tempered, others self-indulgent and irascible, by behaving in one way or the other in the appropriate circumstances. Thus, in one word, states of character arise out of like activities.34

Because of this truth the activities we elect are of vast importance in our lives; definitely, the necessity of the ultimate end endows certain of our choices with an obligatory quality. This is important; in fact, he insists, it is all important.

This is why the activities we exhibit must be of a certain kind; it is because the states of character correspond to the differences between these. It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference.35

To carry his dicta into practice is not without difficulty. Human nature, he recognizes, does not appear to possess a strong tendency to the good life; in fact, it seems almost to struggle with itself as with some interior enemy. Obligation thus takes on a new sternness. As the end is necessary, so the means are necessary (morally, of course); and now that the means are seen to be, as it were, elusive, and difficult of attainment, the quality of the ought involved is intensified.

For exactly as paralysed limbs when we intend to move them to the right turn on the contrary to the left, so is it with

34 II, 1, 1103b 5-21.
35 II, 1, 1103b 22-26.
the soul; the impulses of incontinent people move in con-
trary directions. ... We must ... suppose that in the
soul. ... there is something contrary to the rational princi-
ple, resisting and opposing it.\textsuperscript{36}

It may further be considered that the famous Aristo-
telian doctrine of the mean provides some clue (admittedly quite
general still) to man's specific obligations relative to his ulti-
mate end. In all things, save for the exceptions of intrinsic
morality already sufficiently noted, it is the middle path which
accords with our rational nature. Reason is the guide, and the
standard by which reason is to form its decisions in the agent's
own nature; for the mean is something "relative to us."

Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice,
lying in a mean, i.e., the mean relative to us, this being
determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by
which the man of prudence would determine it.\textsuperscript{37}

Reason will seek out and perceive the mean; it will be for the
volitional faculty to choose it. Because of the great importance
of electing virtuous actions so that virtuous character results,
it may be submitted that here again are at least the outlines of
specific obligations.

There is a further question whose solution will shed
more light upon this Aristotelian concept of obligation. Does
Aristotle account in any way for a consciousness, an awareness,

\textsuperscript{36} I, 13, 1102b 20-25; also see III, 12, 1119b 7-19,
where he notes that the irrational elements in human nature give
rise to insatiable appetites which must be sharply curbed.

\textsuperscript{37} II, 6, 1107a 1-3.
within a man's mind that this action which he is deliberating will, let us say, lead him away from his ultimate end and perfection? Certainly he is not going to require that man follow a course which he is not able to perceive. This would conflict with his own doctrine that actions are subject to the will and the will can only choose something which is first perceived by the intellect.

Since moral virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, and choice is deliberate desire, therefore both the reasoning must be true and the desire right, if the choice is to be good, and the latter desire must pursue just what the former reason asserts. Choice can only follow reason. Daily experience verifies this, for one cannot choose to attend the theatre if the idea never occurs to him. And concerning the ultimate end, it will be impossible of achievement if the necessary means is indistinguishable. The attainment of the ultimate end surely is not to be a merely chance affair, an unforeseen prize for the fortunate. The Christian philosophers have responded to this problem with the discovery of what they have termed conscience.

The closest that Aristotle approaches to any direct solution to this problem is his doctrine on prudence. This is a

38 VI, 2, 1139a 22-25

39 VI, cc 5 and 8-13. The Ross translation used in this study renders προδονος as "practical wisdom". But this is unsatisfactory to the Scholastic philosopher. Wisdom, strictly taken, is speculative, not practical. Ross, of course, is not Scholastic, and uses "practical wisdom" consistently. The thought is more accurately conveyed to Scholastic readers by "prudence", which will henceforth be inserted where Ross uses the other term.
"true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man."\(^4\) It is, then, reason applied to action, "about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect, e.g., about what sorts of thing conduce to health or to strength, but about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general."\(^4\) Prudence concerns the formation of decisions pertaining to whatever is good for oneself. Since it is a virtue, the "good" here must be understood to signify that which is truly good, i.e., conducive to the ultimate goal.

There is further evidence for believing that this serves as man's personal guide and director, informing him of what he ought to do, or, on occasion, what might merely be the better thing to do. When Aristotle compares understanding and prudence, he decides that the latter goes beyond the former in its interior influence on man's conduct: "For prudence issues commands, since its end is what ought to be done or not to be done; but understanding only judges."\(^4\) This appears to put it in definite relation to man's obligations, telling him that his good is to be attained by these means, not by other means here and now. He mentions, moreover, that in the actuality there is little practical

\(^4\) VI, 5, 1140b 4.
\(^4\) VI, 4, 1140a 27.
\(^4\) VI, 10, 1143a 8.
distinction between judgment and understanding and prudence and intelligence—all closely interact and even overlap. And "these states are thought to be natural endowments." It is interesting to note that he relates prudence to the "work of man", which leads one to suspect all the more that the goal of life is unattainable without this virtue. It determines what means will bring one to the end of life perceived by "virtue". Furthermore, in no way does it coerce the will, but merely points out the means that ought to be taken if the end is to be reached. In one instance, in a somewhat offhand manner, he refers to prudence as "this eye of the soul." He states, later on, that there can be nonvirtue of any sort that does not imply and involve this.

Socrates ... in thinking that all the virtues were forms of prudence ... was wrong, but in saying they implied prudence he was right ... Socrates, then, thought the virtues were rules or rational principles (for he thought they were, all of them, forms of scientific knowledge), while we think they involve a rational principle ... with the presence of the one quality, prudence, will be given all the virtues.

Choice will not be right without prudence any more than without virtue; for the one determines the end and the other

43 VI, 11, 1143a 25-31.
44 VI, 11, 1143b 6 (Italics added).
45 VI, 12, 1144a 29.
46 VI, 13, 1144b 17 - 1145a 2
makes us do the things that lead to the end. 47

He is, then unwilling to identify "virtue" and prudence although they are intimately related. If all virtue involves a rational principle, as he says, it must be true that the underlying rational principle is as a beacon light to virtue, illuminating the safe and good path to the desired end.

With reason essential to man and constitutive of his form (which is also his end), it is now intelligible how reason guides man along those lines of conduct which reason alone can perceive and which, moreover, reason alone recognizes as conducive to the rational end of life. Aristotle, genius that he undoubtedly was, did not always express his ethical (and psychological) notions with careful, conscious precision. This would have been of great advantage to later ages when certain philosophical problems disclosed certain perplexing aspects not recognized in his day. However, the evidence is fairly strong, as seen above, that, for him, man's obligations were truly binding on man since he was rendered conscious of them by prudence.

It is now an intellectually secure position that a concept of obligation is basic in his moral philosophy. Furthermore, it has been seen that this concept is consistent with the great fundamental principles of his entire philosophical structure, and

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67 VI. 13. 1145a 4-6.
that he has, more by keen instinct than by conscious design, provided for a rational awareness of means necessary and obligatory for the end of man. But the further question arises concerning the degree of obligation in man's life. How strictly is he bound? Is this obligation absolute; is it a real, inevitable, inexorable must (always, of course, respecting the free faculty of will)?

In response to this it will be necessary first to recall what has been presented earlier in the present chapter of this study. It was seen there that Aristotle conceived the ultimate end of life as being the end for all men, an affair entirely beyond the reach, as it were, of the human will. It is fixed. It is for human nature itself and no man can be or ever will be excused. Hence, the relation of man to his end is inescapable; the obligation to attain this absolute end will be an absolute, moral necessity.

But if man's obligation is a strict, absolute must, is it not clearly implied that some punitive evil will befall him who fails to respect and follow the dictates of that must or ought and so ultimately misses the end? No one doubts that there are many such persons. Certainly it is fundamental to a concept of obligation that he who flaunts and ignores his duty somehow is made to pay for his freely chosen error.

48 See above, pages 48-49.
For Aristotle these questions cannot be given any full, truly adequate answer. They push on into areas of life and activity where a pagan, however gifted of intellect, ventures to speak only with the utmost caution and reserve, or not at all. For he knows nothing of man's origin, and nothing of a continued life after this earthly life reaches its finish.\(^{49}\) Failure, then, for him, is going to be of this earth; moreover, it will need to appear before death—for the good and bad alike die, often with no apparent difference in the manner of their departure. Since the end is happiness, failure to reach the end must, obviously, render the miscreant unhappy in proportion to his failure to respect his obligations. Then too, as briefly seen before,\(^{50}\) a certain corruption of character is said to be visited upon the man who fails. Nature seems to exact a toll—and certainly man's universal experience of man lends at least some substance to this claim. Aristotle speaks rather vividly on this point.

And those who have done many terrible deeds and are hated for their wickedness even shrink from life and destroy themselves. And wicked men seek for people with whom to spend their days, and shun themselves; for they remember many a grievous deed, and anticipate others like them, when they are by themselves, but when they are with others they forget. And having nothing lovable in them they have no feeling of love to themselves. Therefore also such men do not rejoice or grieve with themselves; for their soul is rent by faction, and one element in it by reason of its wickedness grieves when it abstains

\(^{49}\) See above, pages 30–31.

\(^{50}\) See above, pages 41–43.
from certain acts, while the other part is pleased, and one
draws them this way and the other that, as if they were pull-
ing them in pieces. . . . for bad men are laden repentence.
Therefore the bad man does not seem to be amicably dis-
posed even to himself, because there is nothing in him to
love; so that if to be thus is the height of wretchedness, we
should strain every nerve to avoid wickedness and should en-
deavor to be good.51

It is not difficult to understand the burden of this passage, out-
spoken as it is. The wicked are pictured as living in a state of
interior, moral chaos with serenity and peace so banished from
their souls that they no longer love themselves, seeking the asso-
ciation of others for distraction. The portrayal is an ugly one,
and more than a little true. It does indicate that Aristotle holds
that nature metes out a sort of sanction to those who have allowed
their lives to deviate from the pathways of their known obligation.

In summary, it may now be definitely stated that the mor-
al philosophy of Aristotle does essentially involve the note of
obligation. He holds to this fact strongly. Having recognized
the fact in his own consciousness and in the experiences of his
fellow men, his ultimate explanation of it involves, implicitly,
the great basic principles of act and potency, applied to man as
matter and form. Man's perfection and end, then, resides in the
realization of his essential form. This is the determined course

51 IX, 4, 1166b 12-28; there is further evidence of
this in the Politics: "if a man have not virtue, he is the most
unholy and most savage of animals, and the most full of lust and
proper to human nature, which each person is obliged to pursue, according to the practical dictates of his supreme guide and illumination: reason. His obligation thus pertains to those lines of conduct which, harmonizing with his rational nature, are indispensable if he is to attain his necessary end, good, and perfection.

With this exposition of Aristotle's concept of obligation as manifested in the *Ethics* now complete, it will be profitable to proceed in the following (final) chapter to set down an evaluation and criticism of this notion so fundamental in all moral philosophy.
CHAPTER IV

AN EVALUATION OF ARISTOTLE'S
CONCEPT OF OBLIGATION IN
THE ETHICS

In the foregoing pages there has been presented a detailed study of the concept of obligation which Aristotle has woven into the fabric of his Ethics. It is, of course, a pagan concept. Though lofty in aspiration and penetrating in analysis, it remains subject to those severe limitations which must always characterize secular thinking in any age. In the present chapter it will help to set forth an evaluation of the laudable aspects of Aristotle's concept and indicate as its deficiencies. In so doing, the concept itself will become more sharply defined and more adequately understood. The evaluation here presented will be based not on the authority of any particular philosopher but will be based rather on the cogency of its own argumentation. Obviously, however, the writer takes the position of one formed in the great Christian tradition and regarding that philosophical position as sound and true. He recognizes the work of Aristotle as the solid starting-point for Christian speculation, but considers the latter to have performed and far surpassed its Grecian beginnings.
The major criticism to be leveled at Aristotle here is a charge of incompleteness. This differs clearly from a far more serious charge of incorrectness or falsity. Generally, he is not wrong; rather, he has failed to state the whole truth. The present chapter will attempt to indicate this in some detail.

First it will be well to draw the outlines of a distinction which will be valuable here. The distinction is placed between a general concept and the further specification of that same concept. This resembles the familiar distinction between a principle and the application of the principle. The general concept sets forth the outlines, the framework, the basic-guide-posts of an idea, but nothing more. It supplies no detail, no particular facts, nothing to fill in the outlines. The general concept is only skeletal, a mere theoretical outline sketch. To the contrary, the further specification of that concept supplies factual details. It fills out the concept, reduces the general to the more particular. It puts flesh on the skeleton.

This distinction applies here at the very outset of the present critique. Aristotle has set up happiness as the end of human life, a state consisting in the perfection of man's distinctive capacity; his rationality. Here is the general concept. It is sound and correct. Now, it remains general and sound and correct when he proceeds to add the note that happiness is realized in a state of contemplation, that is, a mode of living
centered about contemplative activity. But it is an inadequate specification to limit this contemplation to the present, earthly life. That this is a weak, inadequate position even Aristotle himself admits tacitly. For he quietly concedes that this state is not truly self-sufficient (as he had previously said that the ultimate end should be) since it requires external props in the form of at least minimal material conveniences. If these be lacking, no happiness! The all-important end of human nature is thus put beyond the reach of that very nature for many, without any responsibility on their part. Moreover, many persons must needs work out their entire lifetimes in arduous labor of a sort precluding anything like a contemplative activity -- must these also fail? Aristotle has failed in his attempt to discover the universal answer for his universal problem. If he is seeking the end for human nature, then the end surely should be within the possible reach of all beings included under human being.

Moreover, if those who do not fulfill the lofty, unrealistic standards which he has attempted to set up must be said to fail, why then do not all such persons manifest the signs of failure in this most vital aspect of life? Some of them will strangely continue to conduct themselves as persons who actually are happy! How can a situation be explained? Indeed, Aristotle's general concept of the end as flowing from and intrinsically linked to the rational principle is sound, but his efforts to
specify this further, to implement the outline with detail, can only be labeled inadequate.

Sertillanges has comments on this, brief and pointed.

Aristotle has interest only in this life, and his so-called happiness is restricted to a privileged few, for brief periods and in precarious circumstances. In a world dominated by material things, by rank and birth, only a small minority can lead the higher intellectual life. How can we indulge in it when we are almost entirely engrossed in finding the necessities of life, with little time for contemplation?1

The Christian is set a-back upon realizing that, even in the eyes of so penetrating a man as Aristotle, the slave is classed as non-human. This was an unquestioned part of the atmosphere of the society in which he lived; nevertheless it is most regrettably false, a further flaw in Aristotle's doctrine that all these (many of whom were merely persons who had the misfortune to be captured in war) are unable to be happy.2

The above criticisms reveal a serious deficiency in his moral system, a deficiency crippling if not fatal. For Aristotle has set up a tenuous, inadequate end. His whole moral order (which depends for its vigor and integrity on the end) is going to be basically of a similar quality. Morality is teleological.

1 A. D. Sertillanges, Foundations of Thomistic Philosophy, trans. by Godfrey Anstruther, Herder Book Co., St. Louis, 1931, 236.

2 X, 6, 1177a6
Aristotle, of course, is hardly to be blamed for permitting himself to be born in a time and in a land where the revealed word of Almighty God had not yet made itself known. One may be certain that such a soul as Aristotle would have chosen quite otherwise had the opportunity been extended to him. But such was not the case, and so he lived and wrote without any revealed assurances about the one Supreme Being, the Creator Who created with His own perfect goodness as the end of His operation. Aristotle had not the exalted momentum imparted to his philosophy that later, Christian thinkers knew from the impact of God's eternal truths revealed. Philosophy, one might say, was favored with hints from above; philosophy was "let in" on some of the answers --- not the reasons --- but the answers. Philosophy remained philosophy, but many serious perplexities were largely diminished, which fact proved to be a source of encouragement and boundless inspiration.

Christian philosophy has retained the general concept of man's end as developed by Aristotle, but in elaborating this general concept it has far surpassed and perfected him. True, man's ultimate end and good and perfection must consist in the highest activity of man's highest power; his perfections must consist in the fullest possible realization of that which is proper to him; his rationality. This is Aristotle's general concept; Christian philosophy has profoundly augmented it. For the
supreme good is no longer some vague, highly elusive life of contemplation here on earth. The supreme good, goodness itself, is realized concretely and objectively in God, and man's supreme end as known by natural reason thus consists in the perfect natural possession of the perfect good, God Himself! Man is ordained to enter into the possession of God by the most perfect spiritual operation attainable to him, and to do this in a state where even the possibility of termination exists no longer. This can only be in a future life beyond the grave. The doctrine of the immortality of the soul which enjoyed a full flowering only in Christian philosophies lends further support to this sublime truth of man's end (i.e., *finis quo*). -- Aristotle perceived man's natural desire for happiness, for good and for, moreover, perfect good, but he was unable to probe the significant origin of this desire or to recognize that the supreme good is concretely identified with the source of all being, which is good, the Creator God.  

3 It is well to note that this statement is not intended as a denial that Aristotle had some concept, however vague, of God as beatifying object of man's contemplation, but rather that his concept was obscure because of a lack of understanding. He misses the whole relationship of God as Creator and last end because he simply did not know the doctrine of creation. It remained for Christian philosophy both to tighten and to clarify the intimate relationship between God and man, to see God as man's origin and creative legislator as well as his final, ultimate end! The greatest of the pagan thinkers did not possess the plenitude of knowledge which today, under the Christian dispensation, is the common inheritance of the faithful multitude, the unlettered and the youthful.
It is comparatively easy to criticize those minds, however gifted, which antedated the Christian era. And it is easy to overshoot the mark in so doing, thereby exposing one's own severe limitations. For this colossus of intellect achieved wonders with the evidence at his disposal, and worked miracles of mind surely paralleling, at least, the giants of scientific exploration who so captivate the spotlight in our times. All through the present evaluation, then, it is well to bear in mind the positive achievements so solidly underlying the usually superstructural inadequacies and deviations.

Aristotle was correct in pointing out that the manner by which man is to take hold of the ultimate good is primarily that of intellect. Christian philosophy has, rather inevitably, held to this. Beatitude is to be had through the most perfect use of the most perfect (and specific) faculty, which, of course, is intellect. But now the object of this activity is known to be other than he had supposed.

It was unavoidable on his part to regard man's end solely from the aspect of form. It suffices for the present purposes to note that this notion is entirely correct so far as it goes, but it does not sufficiently take into account the essential relation to an end extrinsic to man, namely, greatest possible union with the perfect good, God. -- In connection with this statement it is instructive to correlate a little-noted
passage in the *De Anima*, 415a 25 -b5, where Aristotle states that all things animate strive for the divine insofar as their natures makes this possible. This line of thought, however, is not stressed in the *Ethics* and hence not in the present study.

To Aristotle, God was but the vague, impersonal prime mover. Moreover, this prime mover moved not as efficient cause but only as final cause (this notion, however, not applied to man, or, if so, only in the most obscure manner). He was not the creator and hence not the law-giver, nor the ultimate good and super-mundane end. Even the brilliant intellect of Aristotle perceived all but nothing of man's origin and only a shadow of his true end; hence he labored under a sorely impoverished concept of human nature itself. — One Aristotelian scholar has noted that "Throughout the *Ethics* ... the conception of God is not brought into the problem of the norm."4 Gilson also comments that, for Aristotle, "the First Unmoved Mover makes no attempt to legislate for man ... he is not the creator of consciences".5

Aristotle holds that man's perfection consists in the realization of his essential form, and this is conceded. But,


again, the inadequacy is glaring. For if this is the primal law of existence, the next question arises immediately: who or what determines it? Certainly the philosopher does not complete his task once he has established the fact of a law; he must, if he would be complete, proceed to explain the reason and cause behind the law. But Aristotle halts here. His fundamental metaphysics has not been exhausted; he has failed to draw from it all that it germinally contained. For had he done so (which, admittedly is asking the almost superhuman from what is, at best, weakly human) he would have ultimately arrived at concepts of an Infinite Being, then eternal law, and creation. The primal law for Aristotle of form striving for self-realization would be seen as a dictate of order depending fundamentally upon the wisdom of a supreme Law-giver. The essential form, the nature of a being, would then have been seen to be determined by the Creator's eternal law. The basic tendencies of the rational nature are only the expression of that ultimate, absolute, eternal law as promulgated in the creature -- and this is the nature law. Thus he gave the basis for a philosophy of natural law, but this effort alone had extended him to the uttermost limits of his vast genius and he was unable to develop it. On this point Gilson again makes an interesting statement:

Duty is not to be deduced from a revelation, but from a doctrine of creation which is itself deduced from a metaphysics of Being. And this metaphysics of Being is deduced from nothing but the exigencies of rational thought. It is altogether natural, therefore, that morality of obligation
should find itself in no conflict with Greek ethics; the Greeks themselves would have attained to it had they but pushed their metaphysics further. 6

Aristotle, then, presents only one half of the complete truth. Moral obligation rests indeed upon human nature itself, as he has said, but ultimately it rests upon the intelligent designs of a personal Creator.

From the foregoing it follows that his doctrine of practical wisdom also limps. Now, one who limps still walks, but he fails to walk as well as a man should, and so with Aristotle. He limps. His practical wisdom is a rather vague, somewhat inconclusive explanation of how a man is made aware of the lines of conduct he ought to follow and ought to avoid. The only explanation it seems Aristotle could offer for this spontaneous service on behalf of the intellect is that, as part of the whole nature, it too must perform its part in cooperation with the whole nature and perform it according to its own peculiar nature. No one cares to say this is false, but it is facile; and the non-philosopher might well express his suspicions in the matter by objecting that "if I am the only one giving orders to myself, if it is all my own doing anyway, I need not feel averse to disobeying myself now and then". This would be something of an inverted 'golden rule'. Aristotle failed to recognize that the interior

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6 Ibid., 362
promptings of the rational faculty in practical matters of "ought" and "ought not" are part of nature, yes, but part of nature as ordained by a Creator Who has created intelligently, according to a plan, and has therefore embedded within the form of his creatures an impulse (in man's case, then, a rational impulse) to respect and follow the pattern which His infinite intellect and will have established. As it should be noted that corollary criticism immediately suggesting itself, Aristotle lacks the essentially stabilizing note on which to ground a doctrine of obligation; an ultimate, absolute authority.

An interesting sidelight on the foregoing comment may be made by noting that Aristotle lacked a proper notion (or, practically, any notion) of authority, principally because he had no true knowledge of the author of human existence. And this is considerably more than a play upon the words.

He was quite correct in his apparently instinctive efforts to provide for an awareness in man of his obligations. For without knowledge of what is good and not good to do, the subject would be unable to indend formally the material good or evil which actually flowed from his action. And without intention, there is no responsibility, no moral act, no obligation. But having gone thus far with truth, again his doctrine falls open to the charge of inadequacy. For, he holds, if one submits the case of a good intention coupled with invincible ignorance the
answer can only be most unsatisfactory. The man, in his philosophy, who acts wrongly even though in all good faith would, it seems, miss the end, since the connection was purely physical, mechanical, not moral. A certain pragmatism appears here. Either the man elects actions which do actually carry him on to the end, or, good intention notwithstanding, he fails. This is true of all secularists. Only if there be a moral link, merit, and a moral judge, God, to take account of formal morality of acts can this unfortunate situation be overcome. It is clear that this is suspiciously close to a merely chance morality; and on this very point one author goes so far as to state that "as a matter of fact, obligation is so loose in Aristotle that its very existence has been denied." 7

On the foregoing charge of pragmatism in Aristotle, (or, rather, that his ethics tends to that), Gilson notes that, in Aristotle, doubtless a means is good

only because it leads us to the end ...; but it is not good because it is adopted for the purpose of attaining the end. If man is always careful to live as nature and reason demand he will find thereby his beatitude, but the value of his moral acts does not depend on any intentionality. 8

It seems a somewhat harsh criticism to label the morality of the Ethics a "chance morality", for there is definitely an order of means to a set end, and a certain moral necessity

7 Sertillanges, 239.
8 Gilson, 356.
imposed upon the will to pursue the known means. This system is far from being air-tight, as has pointed out. But the factor of obligation arising from so fixed a foundation as man's very nature itself is not to be easily set aside. True, very true, the ultimate foundation was overlooked entirely, but some foundation was established, and a foundation not to be lightly esteemed. Inadequate it may be, but at least it is! That is something.

Aristotle's ultimate sanction imposed on those unfortunate who fail to achieve the end is, beyond that failure itself, a certain perversion of character. This is a bit tenuous. There is some reality to it -- witness, for example, the physical horrors visited upon victims of venereal diseases, or the familiar and tragic hardness of heart which develops among conscienceless persons such as fanatical Nazis or Communists -- but it is again inadequate. It is much too arbitrary; is there, for example, any guarantee whatsoever that nature works a certain vengeance upon those who flaunt their obligations in proportion as they so act? Hardly. The only evidence here is utterly incomplete and inconclusive.

But Aristotle had no doctrine of immortality -- at least, it certainly had no influence on his ethical theory even if philosophical suspicions of it ever lingered in his mind. Therefore, philosophically, he could not know of a retribution
after death. The end he established was purely mundane; so was the corresponding sanction. Knowledge of the eternal intentions of the eternal Creator in creating man would have profoundly altered his position.

Much of the same can be said concerning Aristotle's idea of human freedom. He everywhere asserts the fact. But the why of it must always elude him. He recognizes it as indispensable to moral life, but he remains ignorant of its position in the divine pattern of human probation and reward.

Aristotelian obligation is loose as well as of a highly speculative character. Its looseness is a consequence of the fact that the end he has set up for human nature is somewhat broad and general. He has attempted to concretize it as a state of contemplation, but this remains at best vague and indefinite. Moreover, he does little to particularize and specify those means necessary to the end, the necessary virtues. In the ordination to such an end, obligation, though real, is indeed loose. Aristotle must have felt this personally.

His obligation is likewise speculative. To establish it requires metaphysical considerations which might well appear to have scant relation to the concrete realities of daily human living. And obligation, of all problems in philosophy, is surely concerned with the day by day doings of human existence. The
Christian philosopher's obligation involves a concept of human origin and human end which has immeasurably greater cogency than the pagan line of thought. Thus, looked at from a basis of mere utility, pagan obligation is little likely to deter the steps of a man who knows the power of the all too familiar human passions. And the history of pagan civilization bears sad witness to this clear fact.

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B. ARTICLES


The thesis submitted by John C. Schwarz has been read and approved by three members of the Department of Philosophy.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

March 9, 1953

date

Signature of Adviser