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Nicomachean Ethics (Aristotle; excerpts)

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Nicomachean Ethics

(Excerpts)

By Aristotle

c. 350 B.C.

Translated by Thomas L. Pangle

[Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Thomas L. Pangle. Princeton, N.J.: The Witherspoon Institute. 2011. Book 5, 1129b12–30a6 and 1134b18–35a7.]

The laws pronounce publicly about everything, aiming either at the common advantage of all, or of those who are best, or of those who are sovereign on account of virtue or some other such thing. So we say that in one sense the things are just that make and preserve the happiness and the parts of happiness for the political community. For the law commands the doing of the deeds of a courageous man, . . . and those of a moderate man, . . . and those of a man who is in control of his anger, . . . and similarly with the other virtues and vices, commanding the former and forbidding the latter—correctly if laid down correctly, worse if randomly. It is in this sense that justice is perfect virtue, but not simply: rather, in relation to another. And on account of this justice is often held to be supreme among the virtues, so that neither the evening nor the dawn star is so wonderful; and speaking proverbially we say, “in justice is all of virtue taken together.” And this is perfect virtue especially, because it is the use of perfect virtue. And this is perfect, because the one possessing it is able to use virtue in relation to another also, and not only as regards himself. For many are able to use virtue in their homes, but are incapable of doing so in relation to another. And on account of this the saying of Bias seems good, that “ruling will reveal the man”: for he who rules is in community and relation with another. On account of this same thing justice alone of the virtues is held to be what is good for another. For the just person acts so as to advance what is advantageous to another, either a ruler or a partner. . . .

Of political justice there is on the one hand the natural and on the other hand the conventional, and natural is that possessing the same power everywhere, and not by being held or not, while conventional is that which to begin with makes no difference whether [it] is thus or otherwise, but when it is established, does make a difference—such as that a prisoner’s ransom is one mina, or that a goat ought to be sacrificed but not two sheep, and in addition as many matters as are legislated pertaining to one case, such as that sacrifice is to be made to Brasidas, and voted decrees. It seems to some that all are such, because that which is by nature is unchangeable as well as having everywhere the same power—even as fire burns here and among the Persians, but they observe that the just things change. But this does not thus obtain, though it does in a sense. Indeed, among the gods perhaps not at all; but

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among us, there is something by nature, though indeed it is all changeable. But nevertheless there is that which is by nature and that which is not by nature. And what sort of the things that can be otherwise are by nature, and what sort are not, but are conventional and by contract, given that both are similarly changeable, is manifest. And in other matters the same boundary fits: for by nature the right is stronger, though indeed it is possible for all to become ambidextrous. . . . the things not naturally just but humanly so are not the same everywhere, since the political regimes are not, but yet there is only one regime that is everywhere best according to nature. And of the just and conventional things in question, each is as a universal in relation to particulars.

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