Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: Books I-III
a VERY brief and selective summary

Book I

Chapter 1: Aristotle begins with a hypothesis, one which he will proceed to test. That hypothesis is: The Good is that at which all things (including people) aim (or what they all seek). The first step in testing the hypothesis, of course, is to get straight about what it is for people to aim at or seek something. What is it for something to be an `end' of action?

Chapter 2: If there is some end that we seek for its own sake and not as a means to some other end, then clearly that end must be (what we take to be) the highest good. There surely must be such a good -- otherwise we would be seeking each thing for the sake of some other never seeking anything for itself and thus never being able to get what we ultimately seek.

Chapter 3: The study of politics and so the study of the highest good for man, is not an exact science. "It is the mark of the educated man and a proof of his culture that in every subject he looks for only so much precision as its nature permits." (But this is really a digression.)

Chapter 4: What, then, is the highest good? For want of a better name, let us call it "Happiness" -- keeping in mind that people are agreed in their accepting the word but not in the meaning they give to it.

Chapter 4: Methodology. To find the highest good, we must begin with the evidence we have and move from that to first principles, not the other way around.

Chapter 5: By looking at the lives people actually lead we can discover a clue as to what they take to be good. Some seek pleasure -- their vulgarity comes out in their preference for the life of a satisfied pig; some seek honor -- yet honor depends more on others than on he that has it, and anyway, intelligent people seek honor only as confirmation of their goodness, i.e., as confirmation of their virtue; hence some seek virtue -- yet even virtue cannot be the highest good since it may be had by those who are clearly not happy (despite what Socrates says); as for money, people clearly seek it--but only as a means to getting other things they want (unless they are as confused as Midas).

Chapter 6: Aristotle's criticism of Plato's theory of Forms.

Chapter 7: Aristotle returns to the question: what is the Highest Good? Whatever it is, (1) it must be chosen (always) for its own sake and (never) as a means to something else, and (2) it must be such that when completely had by a person, that person is lacking in nothing that is worth having. Happiness meets both of these constraints.

But more must now be said about the nature of happiness, if our formula--The Highest Good = Happiness--is to tell us anything interesting. To find out more about happiness, and the

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Highest Good, Aristotle turns to a discussion of the function of man. This approach has promise since for anything X that has a function, we can characterize a Good X as an X that performs its function well. Assuming people do have a function (and this seems reasonable enough given all the other things that have a function) we can characterize a Good person as a person who performs his or her function well. What then is a person's function? It must be something peculiar to people, so it concerns neither the basic functions of living (which are after all shared by all living things) nor sensations (which are shared by all sentient beings). Instead, it must concern a person's rational faculties. The function of a person, then, will be to live his or her life in accordance to rational principles; and a good person will be one who does this well. Since a function is performed well when it is performed in accordance with the excellence proper to it (i.e., in accordance with its virtue), a good person is one who exercises his or her virtue.

We get the following picture:

What we all seek = Highest Good  
What we all seek = Happiness  
Highest Good = Happiness  
Fulfilling function well = Exercising Virtue  
Fulfilling function well = Highest Good  
Exercising virtue = Highest Good  
Fulfilling function well = Happiness  
Exercising virtue = Happiness
Chapter 1: Intellectual virtue comes from learning, while moral virtue comes from habit. Hence none of the moral virtues are implanted by nature, for what is implanted by nature cannot be influenced by habit, whereas moral virtue can be. It is in the course of our dealings with our companions that we become just or unjust. It is our behavior in a crisis and our habitual reactions to danger that make us brave or cowardly. Since like activities produce dispositions, "It is not unimportant, then, to acquire one sort of habit or another, right from our youth. On the contrary, it is very important, indeed all-important." (1103a25)

Chapter 2: Keeping in mind that we should not require more exactness of ethics than its nature allows, we may start with this observation: moral virtues are such that they are destroyed both by deficiency and by excess. (Think of health, and how it is built by the right amount of exercise -- neither too much nor too little.) Moral virtues are built by performing the actions a virtuous person would. (It is by refraining from pleasure that we become temperate, and it is in being temperate that we become most able to resist the lure of pleasure.)

Chapter 3: Virtue and Pleasure. The test of someone's having a particular virtue is whether he or she takes pleasure in performing the virtuous action. (A person is temperate who abstaining from bodily pleasures finds this abstinence itself pleasant.) Not only is the test of virtue the taking of pleasure in its performance, pleasure (and pain) also have a great many other things to do with virtue. For instance, (1) pleasure and pain often lead people astray, (2) the performance of actions (virtuous or not) are accompanied (always, Aristotle says) by pleasure or pain, (3) pain is a successful instrument of punishment. Conclusions of this chapter: (i) virtue is concerned with pleasure and pain, (ii) the actions which produce virtue are identical with those which increase it, (iii) differently performed these actions destroy virtue, (iv) the actions which produced virtue are identical with those in which it finds its expression.

Chapter 4: But how can one perform (say) a just action unless one is already just? Answer: we must distinguish the performance of actions of a certain kind (e.g., just or temperate actions) from the way in which they are performed. An action is truly virtuous only if three conditions are met: (1) the agent must act in full consciousness of what she is doing; (2) she must `will' her action, and will it for its own sake, and (3) the act must proceed from a fixed and settled disposition. (Since we are especially concerned with being moral, and not just with knowing about it, it is the second two conditions that are the most important.) [Note a different problem: if a just action is defined in terms of what the just person would do, and a just person is defined as s/he who from a settled disposition performs just actions, how are we to avoid circularity?]

Chapter 5: The Formal Definition of Virtue: The Genus. The human soul has (i) emotions (feelings), (ii) capacities, and (iii) states (i.e. characteristics or dispositions). Virtues are not feelings, as we can tell from the fact that we are good or bad according to our virtues and vices, but not according to our feelings; we are praised or blamed for our virtues and vices, but not for our feelings alone (but only for having them in a particular way); our virtues and
vices are expressions of our will, but feelings are not; and finally, we are said to be moved by our feelings, whereas with regard to our virtues and vices we are said instead to be disposed this way or that. Similar arguments show that virtues and vices are not capacities either. Thus, virtues and vices must be states.

Chapter 6: The Formal Definition of Virtue: The Differentia. Excellence of whatever kind affects that of which it is the excellence in two ways: the excellence (i.e. virtue) makes what has it good-of-its-kind and it enables it to perform its function well. Hence virtue in a person will be what makes that person a good person and what enables him or her to perform his or her function well.

We must distinguish what is the mean relative to the object from what is the mean relative to us. (6 is the mean between 2 and 10 relative to the object, but may not be relative to us; 10 is a lot more relative to us than 2 is less relative to us.) With this said, we can define virtue as a disposition of the soul in which, when it has to choose among actions and feelings, it observes the mean relative to us (this being determined by such a rule or principle as would take shape in the mind of a man of sense and practical wisdom). Of course, not all actions admit of a mean relative to us -- consider malice, shamelessness, murder.

Chapter 7: The chart of the virtues. These have to do with feelings (fear and confidence, pleasure and pain), with external goods (money in small amounts, money in large amounts, honor and dishonor), and with social life (anger, truth-telling [pride], and humor). The corresponding virtues are: bravery, temperance, generosity, magnificence, magnanimity, mildness, truthfulness, wit, and friendliness.

Chapter 8: Keep in mind that the relevant mean is the mean relative to us. Unlike the mean in the object, the mean relative to us is often very difficult to discover.

Chapter 9: Some practical guidance. Keep away from that extreme which is the more opposed to the mean. Note the errors into which you personally are most liable to fall. Always be particularly on your guard against the temptations of pleasure and pleasant things.
### Aristotle's Chart of the Virtues and Vices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sphere of action or feeling</th>
<th>Excess</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Deficiency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear and Confidence</td>
<td>Rashness</td>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>Cowardice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleasure and Pain</td>
<td>Licentiousness</td>
<td>Temperance</td>
<td>Insensibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving and Spending</td>
<td>Prodigality</td>
<td>Liberality</td>
<td>Illiberality (greed)</td>
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<tr>
<td>(minor)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving and Spending</td>
<td>Vulgarity</td>
<td>Magnificence</td>
<td>Pettiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(major)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Honor and Dishonor</td>
<td>Ambition</td>
<td>Proper Ambition</td>
<td>Unambitiousness</td>
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<tr>
<td>(minor)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honor and Dishonor</td>
<td>Vanity</td>
<td>Mangnanimity</td>
<td>Pusillanimity</td>
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<tr>
<td>(major)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Irascibility</td>
<td>Patience</td>
<td>Lack of spirit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-expression</td>
<td>Boastfulness</td>
<td>Truthfulness</td>
<td>Understatement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>Buffoonery</td>
<td>Wittiness</td>
<td>Boorishness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Conduct</td>
<td>Obsequiousness</td>
<td>Friendliness</td>
<td>Contankerousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shame</td>
<td>Shyness</td>
<td>Modesty</td>
<td>Shamelessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indignation</td>
<td>Envy</td>
<td>Righteous</td>
<td>Malicious enjoyment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Indignation</td>
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</tbody>
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Chapter 1: One of the conclusions of Book II is that virtue has to do with both feelings and (most directly) with actions. Actions, though, may be divided into those that are voluntary (for which people are praised and blamed) and those that are involuntary (for which people are pardoned or pitied, and certainly not praised).

Actions that are not voluntary are those performed under (i) force [compulsion] or (ii) ignorance (of a certain kind).

Although force makes an action not voluntary, threats and offers do not -- even though they may turn what would otherwise seem an involuntary of action into a voluntary one (under the circumstances). We may define an action done under force as one that is caused from the outside and to which the agent contributes nothing. Pleasant things, while external to us and in a sense often the cause of our actions, are nonetheless not the sort of things that can render an action not voluntary; for an action forced, and done unwillingly, is an action that we find painful.

While many kinds of ignorance may make an action not voluntary, not all ignorance will make an action involuntary. For instance, those actions done in ignorance that bring no regret in their wake are not actions done involuntarily (for they bring no pain), although they are not done voluntarily. Also, action done in ignorance (say, by a person who is willingly drunk) but not caused by ignorance will not for that reason be involuntary. Even so, some ignorance does make an action not voluntary -- action caused by ignorance of particulars (as opposed to ignorance of universals, for which we are blamed). There are at least six kinds of particulars of which one might be ignorant. They are: (1) who is acting, (2) what is being done, (3) what it is being done to, (4) what the instrument of the action is, (5) what the consequences of the action are, and (6) what the manner of the action is. While ignorance of any of these kinds of particulars can make an action involuntary, even they will do so only if after the action the agent feels regret for what has happened. Otherwise such ignorance merely renders the action not voluntary.

A voluntary action, then, is one that finds its origin in the agent when the agent is acting without ignorance of particulars.

Chapter 2: With the definition of voluntary action in hand, we turn now to figuring out the nature of decision [or choice as it is sometimes translated] for it is decision that is the most reliable guide to the nature of one's character.

All acts decided upon are voluntary, but not all voluntary acts are the result of decision -- after all, animals and even the youngest of children often act voluntarily, but they do not make decisions.
What is it to make a decision? It is not: an appetite, or emotion, or wish, or even some sort of belief.

Not appetite: for appetite is shared with animals, while decision is not. Similarly for emotion.

Not wish: for we can wish for the impossible but we cannot choose to do the impossible.

Not a belief in general: for we can have beliefs about anything, while we cannot decide just anything.

Not a specific kind of belief: for decisions have effects and are praised and blamed in ways beliefs do not and are not.

What is it to make a decision? It is to voluntarily perform an action that is preceded by deliberation.

Chapter 3: To understand decision, then, we must understand deliberation. First of all, deliberation can only be about that which we think we can influence through our actions. And, second of all, deliberation is always of means to ends (which themselves are not deliberated about except to the extent that they themselves are means to some further end). “…we lay down the end, and then examine the ways and means to achieve it.” (Another translation: "We take the end for granted, and then consider in what manner and by what means it can be realized.") [1112b 15]

Chapter 4: We decide on the means and wish for the end. Thinking back to Aristotle's claim that what we all seek is the good (and ultimately the highest good) we may ask: Do we wish for what is really good or only for what seems (to us) to be good? Well, both: “without qualification and in reality, what is wished is the good, but for each person what is wished is the apparent good” (Another translation: "in an unqualified sense and from the standpoint of truth the object of wish is the good, but ...for each individual it is whatever seems good to him.") [1113a 20].

Chapter 5: According to Aristotle we are responsible for whether we are virtuous or not, for virtues (and vices) find their expression in our voluntary actions: “But if doing,, and likewise not doing, fine or shameful actions is up to us, and if, as we saw, [doing or not doing them] is [what it is] to be a good or bad person, being decent or base is up to us.” (Another translation: "it depends on us whether we are decent or worthless individuals.") [1113b 10]. This conclusion finds support in our legal system, which punishes evil-doers (unless they have acted under constraint or in ignorance when they themselves are not responsible for that constraint or ignorance).

One might object that people should not be held responsible for their voluntary actions because being negligent or evil may be part of their character. But that is no excuse; a person is responsible, Aristotle holds, for his or her character as well as for the particular actions to which the character gives rise. This is because a person's character is the result of his or her voluntary actions. “…he is himself responsible for becoming this sort of person, because he has lived carelessly. Similarly, an individual is responsible for being unjust, because he has
cheated, and for being intemperate, because he has passed his time in drinking and the like; for each type of activity produces the corresponding sort of person.” (Another translation: "A man is himself responsible for becoming careless, because he lives in a loose and carefree manner; he is likewise responsible for being unjust or self-indulgent... For a given kind of activity produces a corresponding character.") [1114a 5].

Although an unjust person has become so voluntarily (because his or her unjust character is the result of voluntary actions), he or she may no longer be able to change. “the person who is [now] unjust or intemperate was originally free not to acquire this character, so that he has it willingly, though once he has acquired the character, he is no longer free not to have it [now].” (Another translation:"...since an unjust or a self-indulgent man initially had the possibility not to become unjust or self-indulgent, he has acquired these traits voluntarily; but one he has acquired them it is no longer possible for him not to be what he is.") [1114a 20].

Given Aristotle's theory of how actions are determined by ends that are not of our own choosing (although they are of course our ends), there is another argument one might offer for thinking people are not responsible for their actions: “everyone aims at the apparent good, and does not control how it appears.” (Another translation: "All men seek what appears good to them, but they have no control over how things appear to them.") [1114a 30]. In response, Aristotle argues that “we are ourselves in a way jointly responsible for our states of character, and the sort of character we have determines the sort of end we lay down. Hence the vices will also be voluntary, since the same is true of them.” (Another translation: "we share in some way the responsibility for our own characteristics and because the ends we set up for ourselves are determined by the kind of persons we are, it follows that the vices, too, are voluntary; for the same is true of them.") [1114b 25].