

THE FOUNDATIONS OF  
**WISDOM**

VOLUME 4

**ETHICS**  
**STUDY GUIDE**



# THE FOUNDATIONS OF WISDOM

VOLUME 4

## ETHICS STUDY GUIDE

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# CONTENTS

Introduction . . . . .	1
Definitions for Ethics . . . . .	4
Introduction: The Art of Living Well / Chapter 1: The Meaning of Life. . . . .	6
Chapter 2: What Happiness Is Not . . . . .	9
Chapter 3: From a Nominal to an Essential Definition of Happiness . . . . .	11
Chapter 4: Has Happiness Been Well Defined? . . . . .	15
Chapter 5: Virtue: The Road to Happiness. . . . .	18
Chapter 6: Choice and Human Acts . . . . .	22
Chapter 7: Natural Law . . . . .	25
Chapter 8: Friendship . . . . .	28
Chapter 9: Education and Wisdom (the Return to Happiness). . . . .	32
General Questions for Ethics. . . . .	34



# Introduction to This Study Guide

THIS IS A STUDY GUIDE to accompany volume 4 of *The Foundations of Wisdom: An Introduction to the Perennial Philosophy (Ethics)*. In this study guide, I will explain the overall structure of volume 4 and how to read its text. I will also include essential, chapter-by-chapter questions you should be asking and answering as you read through the material. The answers to these questions are not all found explicitly in the text itself (though some are). The purpose of these questions is not only to help the student read the material carefully and to memorize or repeat information found in it but also to think about things implied by or related to the teaching in the text.

## Logic, Natural Philosophy, and the Study of the Soul as Prerequisites to Ethics

If you are studying philosophy correctly, you must follow the right road, the right order of study, as you investigate each part of philosophy. This was something recognized by the greatest of the ancient philosophers, e.g., Plato and Aristotle, as well as by other great thinkers throughout the ages. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that the study of ethics presupposes the study of natural things and the soul, which in turn presupposes the study of logic.<sup>1</sup> We can see the truth of this assertion in a general way even before having studied ethics in detail. For example, since ethics is about the good of man (it is the art of making a man into a good man), it is necessary to know in a distinct way what man is before determining what is good for man, just as a doctor must know what an eye is before knowing what is good for an eye. The study of the soul, and especially the human soul, provides a much more distinct knowledge of human nature and the powers and abilities of human nature than the virtues perfect. And as we have already seen from the previous study guide, the study of the soul presupposes logic and natural philosophy. So, if you have not yet studied logic, natural philosophy, and the study of the soul, you should lay this book aside and study those subjects well before taking up this book again. One way to do this is to start at the beginning of this series since the previous three volumes consider logic, natural philosophy, and the study of the soul respectively.

## The Dispositions of the Student of Ethics

The fact that ethics presupposes so many other sciences naturally leads to the question: How old should someone be in order to profit from the study of ethics? Aristotle famously asserted that the young are not good students of ethics.<sup>2</sup> Mathematics can easily be learned by the young, and even logic and something of the natural sciences can be studied with some profit by students in their late teens. But ethics poses some particular problems for the young. Not only does ethics presuppose a

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<sup>1</sup> See his *Commentary on the Book of Causes, proemium* and his *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VI, lect. 7, n.17; also see his commentary on Boethius' *De Trinitate*, Part 3, q. 5, a. 1, ag. 10.

<sup>2</sup> See *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. I, ch. 3.

fundamental grasp of logic, natural philosophy, and the study of the soul, but it also requires the experience of acquiring moral habits as well as freedom from unruly emotions. Such dispositions are not usually found in the young, at least not without supernatural help. In my experience as a teacher, however, I have found that morally well-formed students in their late teens (at the end of high school or the beginning of college) do profit in some degree from the study of ethics. This is because the general principles of ethics can be grasped by students of this age and also because many of the more particular principles make sense or seem probable to morally well-formed students. Nevertheless, students of this age should be encouraged to return to the study of ethics when they advance in age, virtue, and experience.

### **The Need for a Teacher**

In the three previous study guides, I touched upon the need for a teacher in philosophy or in any difficult matter. Ethics is no exception. There are many difficult questions raised in ethics, such as “What is happiness?” and “Is it possible for someone to become happy through his own efforts?” Since ethics is among things difficult to learn and requires much experience, it cannot be learned well simply from a book. There are so many questions that ethics raises that no book could adequately consider all of them without becoming too large. No book can answer questions the way a teacher can, and so no book, by itself, is sufficient as a guide for the life of the mind. But beyond the difficulty of the subject matter, something common to all of philosophy, there is a special reason why ethics requires a teacher. In the moral life, we need not only an intellectual guide to show us what is true but also a moral guide to give an example of how to act well in particular circumstances. The need for a moral guide is something I will take up in greater detail later. Suffice it to say, I strongly recommend that you not only read this book on ethics (together with this study guide) but also that you try to find a teacher who already knows this subject matter well and who lives according to what he knows.

### **The Overall Plan of the Ethics Text**

After a brief introduction, the text is divided into three parts. The first part is about happiness as the target of ethics (chapters 1–4). The second part is about the means to arrive at happiness, especially virtue (chapters 5–8). The third part is about happiness as something made possible by means of acquired virtues and education (chapter 9).

The four chapters on happiness as the target of ethics begin with some nominal definitions of happiness in chapter 1, followed by a negative approach to understanding what happiness is by ruling out the usual suspects for happiness (wealth, power, pleasure, etc.) in chapter 2. Chapter 3 formulates a positive definition of happiness, beginning with the nominal definitions of happiness and arriving at an essential definition of happiness, which includes an account of the causes of happiness. Finally, chapter 4 seeks to confirm that the definition of happiness found in chapter 3 conforms to our experience.

The four chapters on the means to happiness begin with a consideration of the nature of virtue and some instructions on how to acquire and grow in virtue (chapter 5). Next, chapters 6 and 7 consider some principles and causes of the virtues, namely, choice and the other human acts that cause virtue or vice, as well as the natural law, which is the measure that reason uses to determine whether particular human actions are good or bad. Finally, chapter 8 considers friendship as a kind of perfection following from virtue and as a prerequisite to happiness.

The last chapter (chapter 9) focuses on education as a privileged road to happiness. Here, education is taken in the broad sense of leading someone to the perfection of both the intellectual and moral virtues.

The text also includes two appendices, including a list of definitions (reproduced below for the convenience of the reader) and a text that includes more detailed teaching on civic and family life.

### **Using Supplementary Texts**

Some chapters refer the student to supplementary texts in the footnotes (and, in one case, to the appendix). These texts include the original texts of great thinkers as well as texts by modern authors. Depending upon the abilities of the teacher and students, as well as upon the time you have to complete the course, these supplementary texts can be very helpful in examining a subject in greater detail. If the teacher is very knowledgeable and familiar with the supplementary text, and the students are more advanced, these texts will be very helpful in increasing the student's knowledge of ethics. However, the course can be completed without reading the supplementary texts. They are options for those who desire to use them.

### **How Much Reading and Study Time Should be Devoted to Each Part?**

The time needed to cover the materials in this book is the sum of the time it takes to read the book and cover the material in class. The amount of time it should take a student to read the book carefully is approximately 10–15 hours. The amount of class time to cover the contents of this book should total somewhere between 30–45 hours. So a student should expect that the total amount of time necessary to cover the entire contents of the ethics book with this accompanying study guide will be between 40 and 60 hours.

As a ballpark figure, chapters 1–4 should take approximately 15–25 hours to read and discuss; chapters 5–8 should take approximately 15–30 hours to read and discuss; and chapter 9 should take approximately 5–10 hours to read and discuss (the 10-hour estimate includes a consideration of the supplementary texts).

These are simply estimates based on my experience teaching this material. There may be reasons or circumstances why a particular student might use significantly more time than what is recommended, but it would be unusual that a student would need significantly less time than the 40 hours recommended here.

# Definitions for Ethics

<b>Ethics:</b>	The art of acting in such a way as to best achieve the ultimate purpose of human life.
<b>Happiness (nominal):</b>	The perfect (or ultimate) good of a rational being. Or: That good for the sake of which everything is chosen and which is never chosen for the sake of anything else. Or: That good that totally satisfies all desires.
<b>Happiness (essential):</b>	The activity of contemplating God by means of virtue.
<b>Moral Virtue:</b>	A habit of choosing in the mean, according to reason and relative to us, as the prudent man would do.
<b>Choice:</b>	A voluntary act as a result of deliberation, which determines the will to a single good means immediately within its power.
<b>Temperance:</b>	The virtue of the concupiscible appetite that firmly inclines one to choose in the mean with regard to the pleasures of touch and taste so as to moderate the acts of nutrition and reproduction.
<b>Fortitude:</b>	The virtue of the irascible appetite that firmly inclines one to choose in the mean with regard to fear and daring so as to strengthen one to persevere, especially in contests in which there is danger of death.
<b>Justice:</b>	The virtue of the will that firmly inclines one to render to each person what is their due.
<b>Prudence:</b>	Right reason about the things to be done (i.e., means to be chosen).
<b>Art:</b>	Right reason about things to be made.
<b>Understanding:</b>	The virtue of the mind by which the immediate and universal propositions are firmly grasped.
<b>Science:</b>	The virtue of the mind by which the universal and necessary conclusions drawn from first, immediate propositions are firmly grasped.

**Wisdom:** The virtue of the mind by which one grasps the first and most universal causes of things and by which one judges all science and understanding.

**Friendship:** A mutual and affective love between two persons that is recognized by both and founded upon some shared good.

**Pleasure:** An act of an appetitive power that perfects the appetite as rest in a fitting good that is possessed.

# Introduction: The Art of Living Well

## Chapter 1: The Meaning of Life

### What to Look for in the Introduction and Chapter 1

Try to understand the relationship between ethics and the other sciences discussed in the introduction. Also, try to understand why the first task of ethics is to find the definition of happiness and why the nominal definitions of happiness provided in the text correspond to how we use the word “happiness.”

### Summary of the Introduction and Chapter 1

The introduction links the previous books with this one. To this end, the introduction identifies the place of ethics within the whole body of knowledge and shows from this that ethics presupposes logic, natural philosophy, and the study of the soul to be done well.

The first chapter begins with a consideration of the ultimate aim of human choices and actions. By way of a dialogue, it manifests that the name we give to this ultimate goal is happiness. The dialogue goes on to show that the first thing we need to do in ethics is to define happiness and to determine if there is some real thing or real things corresponding to the name happiness. That is, we must begin with a nominal definition of happiness and then, if possible, arrive at an essential definition of happiness. Finally, some nominal definitions of happiness are proposed at the end of chapter 1.

### Questions about the Introduction and Chapter 1

Why could someone not begin ethics without studying logic, natural philosophy, and the soul?

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How is ethics different from other practical arts like logic and medicine?

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Why could someone not live a good life by only aiming at proximate goods that he could get in the here and now rather than trying to determine some ultimate good like happiness?

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Why would knowing what happiness is give an advantage to someone seeking to live a good life or to become happy?

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Are living a good life and being happy the same thing?

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Does the fact that almost everyone agrees that happiness is the ultimate thing everyone is looking for guarantee that happiness is possible for anyone?

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Does the definition of happiness make clear from the beginning that every human being will find happiness in the same thing?

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Why are many nominal definitions of happiness provided in the text instead of just one? Does this imply that there are many kinds of happiness?

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