Aristotle’s Virtue Ethics
“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.”

[Nicomachean Ethics, Book One, Ch. 1]

[Ἐθικὸν Νικομαχείων]
Aristotle on Science

**Science**: an axiomatic system, where necessary first principles lead by deductive inference to all the truths of the discipline. (*Post. Anal.,* I.6)

**Productive**, whose end is the production of something (agriculture, engineering, architecture, *poetics, rhetoric*).

**Practical**, whose end is human action (*political science, ethics*).

**Theoretical**, whose end is truth (of which there are three main divisions): Mathematics, Natural Science, Theology.
A Few Greek Terms

**Ethika**: matters to do with character.

**Arete**: virtue / excellence.

**Eudaimonia**: happiness / human flourishing / human well-being.
Reading the Text

(1) What does Aristotle mean by ‘good’? [Bk. 1, ch. 1]

(2) Is there a highest good? [Bk. 1, chs. 2, 4]

(3) What is the function of human beings? [Bk. 1, ch. 7, para. 5]

(4) What are the parts of the soul? [Bk. 1, ch. 13, para. 2-5]

(5) What are the kinds of virtues? How do we get them? [Bk. 1, ch. 13, last para. + Bk. 2, ch. 1, para. 1]
Aristotle on the Good

**Instrumental Good**: Something desired for the sake of another.

**Final Good**: Something desired for its own sake.

**The Highest Good**: Something desired for its own sake, and never for the sake of another.

**Question**: Is there a highest good?

**Obvious answer**: Yes, and it is happiness.

[Bk. 1, ch. 4]
What is Happiness? Everyone agrees it is our highest good, but each understands it differently, depending on whether they favor the life of …

(1) **Enjoyment** (pursuing pleasure).
(2) **Politics** (pursuing honor).
(3) **Contemplation** (pursuing truth).

[Bk. 1, chs. 4-5]
Aristotle on the Good

What is Happiness? Everyone agrees it is our highest good, but each understands it differently, depending on whether they favor the life of …

1. Enjoyment (pursuing pleasure).
2. Politics (pursuing honor).

To decide between these lives, we need more clarity on “when a thing is good.” [→ ch. 7]

[Bk. 1, chs. 4-5]
Aristotle on Being Good

Good → Being Good → Function → Parts of the Soul → Reason → Virtues

Being Good = good as a certain kind of thing.
X is a good A = X excels at A’s function.

The function (*ergon*) of A = what A alone can do, or what A does best.

Ex: The function of a butter knife is to cut and spread butter (sharp, but not too sharp, rigid, etc.)

So: a good human being is one who excels at the function of being human. [Bk. 1, ch. 7]

Question: Do humans have a function?
The function of human beings: whatever human beings alone can do, or can do best.

Is the function of human beings …

… nutrition and growth?
(No, for all living things excel at this)

… sensation?
(No, for all animals excel at this)

… reason?
(Yes, for human beings alone have this).
Aristotle on the Human Soul

Good → Being Good → Function → **Parts of the Soul** → Reason → Virtues

**Rational Part:** The part that thinks

**Irrational Part:** The part that doesn’t think

- **Nutritive** … and causes nutrition and growth. — *not affected by reason*
- **Appetitive** … and desires. — *affected by reason*

[Bk. 1, ch. 13]
Aristotle on the Roles of Reason

Reason plays two roles in human beings …

Theoretical — insofar as it participates in the theoretical sciences (seeking truth regardless of practical application).

Practical — insofar as it restrains our appetites and guides our conduct and emotions.

… and therefore we can excel in two ways: Intellectual Virtues, concerning knowledge. Moral Virtues, concerning our conduct.

[Bk. 1, ch. 13]
## Aristotle on the Virtues

Good → Being Good → Function → Parts of the Soul → Reason → **Virtues**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kind of Virtue</th>
<th>As an excellence in the:</th>
<th>Acquired through:</th>
<th>Aiming at:</th>
<th>Requiring:</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral (character)</td>
<td>practical sphere</td>
<td>habit</td>
<td>intelligent conduct</td>
<td><em>phronesis</em></td>
<td>liberality, temperance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>theoretical sphere</td>
<td>learning</td>
<td>discovering truth</td>
<td>experience</td>
<td><em>sophia, phronesis</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sophia = wisdom  
Phronesis = practical wisdom (prudence)
“Someone might raise this puzzle: ‘What do you mean by saying that to become just we must first do just actions and to become temperate we must first do temperate actions? For if we do what is grammatical or musical, we must already be grammarians or musicians. In the same way, then, if we do what is just or temperate, we must already be just or temperate.’”

[Bk. 2, ch. 4]
Being virtuous involves more than acting virtuously.

“The agent also must be in a certain condition when he does them. First, he must know they are virtuous, second he must choose the acts and choose them for their own sakes, and third his action must proceed from a firm and unchanging character.”

[Bk. 2, ch. 4]
“It is right, then, to say that a person comes to be just from doing just acts...; without practice no one has even a prospect of becoming good. But most people do not do this, but take refuge in theory and believe they are being philosophers and will become good simply by thinking, behaving somewhat like patients who listen attentively to their doctors, but do none of the things they are ordered to do. Such a course of treatment will not improve the state of their body; neither will a course of philosophy improve the state of their soul.”

[Bk. 2, ch. 4]
A state of character …
… that aims at the intermediate …
… between excess and deficiency …
… as concerns our actions and passions.

[Bk. 2, ch. 5]
A state of character ... (i.e., a disposition to behave) as opposed to a passion (e.g., fear) or a faculty (e.g., the ability to feel fear).

... that aims at the intermediate ... ... between excess and deficiency ... ... as concerns our actions and passions.

[Bk. 2, ch. 5]
A state of character …

… that aims at the intermediate …

“in the object” vs “relative to us”

… between excess and deficiency …

… as concerns our actions and passions.
A state of character …
… that aims at the intermediate …
… between excess and deficiency …

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excess</th>
<th>Intermediate</th>
<th>Deficiency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fearlessness/Rashness</td>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>Cowardice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-indulgence</td>
<td>Temperance</td>
<td>Insensible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prodigality</td>
<td>Liberality</td>
<td>Meanness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

… as concerns our actions and passions.

[Bk. 2, ch. 6]
A state of character …
… that aims at the intermediate …
… between excess and deficiency …
… as concerns our actions and passions.

“Both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, in what is both intermediate and best — this is characteristic of virtue. Similarly with regard to actions also there is excess, defect, and the intermediate.”

[Bk. 2, ch. 6]
“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. … It is not possible ever to be right with regard to them.” [Bk. 2, ch. 6]
On the Difficulty of Being Good

“...It is no easy task to be good, for it is no easy task to find the **middle**; e.g., to find the middle of a circle is not for every one but for him who knows; so, too, any one can get angry — that is easy — or give or spend money; but do to this to the right **person**, to the right **extent**, at the right **time**, with the right **motive**, and in the right **way**, that is not for everyone, nor is it easy; wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble.” [Bk. 2, ch. 9]
Aristotle’s “Rules of Thumb”

1. Avoid the extreme furthest from the mean.
2. Beware of your own prejudices.

[Bk. 2, ch. 9]