

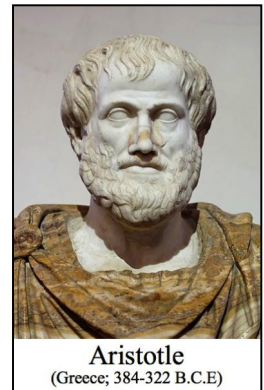
VIRTUE ETHICS

“BY NATURE, ALL HUMAN BEINGS DESIRE TO KNOW.”

— Aristotle (384-322 BCE), *Metaphysics*

[50] ARISTOTLE’S VIRTUES

At the age of seventeen, Aristotle (384-322 BCE) traveled from northern Greece to Athens where he hoped to study at Plato’s famous Academy. He must have liked what he found, since he stayed for nineteen years, eventually becoming one of the teachers. He left the Academy and Athens when Plato died in 347, but returned in 335 to open his own school at the Lyceum (a gymnasium and garden located near the temple of Apollo Lyceus). Aristotle is reported to have written dialogues after the manner of Plato, as well as the extensive lecture notes that he used in the classroom, and ancient readers of his dialogues claim that he was an exceptionally gifted writer. Unfortunately none of these dialogues survived many centuries past his death, and all that we have had available of Aristotle’s writings (at least for the last two thousand years or so) are his lecture notes. Some of these notes are highly polished, while others are rough and rather schematic, and much of their ordering was introduced later by ancient editors. But regardless of their literary merit, their philosophical and scientific importance is unsurpassed, and has affected the nature and growth of the western intellectual world in untold ways. Aristotle was a great scholar, scientist, and teacher, a giant of the past whose thoughts still move as a living force among us.



Two separate sets of his lecture notes on ethics have survived — the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemian Ethics*. The former is by far the more developed and important of the two; it has been widely read throughout the centuries, and is still a common text in undergraduate curricula around the world. Like so much of what Aristotle wrote, it is the first systematic discussion of ethics in recorded history. Much of interest is discussed in the ten books comprising the *Nicomachean Ethics*: the good, virtue and vice, justice, friendship, weakness of the will, pleasure and happiness. Perhaps it is because human nature has changed so little in the last twenty-five centuries that Aristotle’s observations in moral psychology still sound wholly familiar. In the following, I will outline a few themes from Books I and II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

ETHICS AS THE SCIENCE OF HUMAN FLOURISHING

Science, according to Aristotle, is a systematic body of true beliefs, and all knowledge, in order to be knowledge, must be part of some science or other. To know something (for example, that water freezes at 0° Celsius) is not merely to entertain a true belief, but also to know *why* it is true; only then does one have *episteme* (the Greek word typically translated as “knowledge” but more accurately as “scientific knowledge”).

Aristotle viewed all of human knowledge as divided into three kinds of science: theoretical, practical, and productive. The productive sciences are those concerned with making something (such as the science of making pots, or of farming, or of writing poetry). The practical sciences concern how we are to behave among ourselves (two prominent examples here are political science and ethics). The theoretical sciences are concerned neither with production, nor with human action, but rather with *truth*, and Aristotle believed that the vast majority of science was theoretical, which he further divided into three parts: mathematics, natural science, and theology. But we must leave these divisions and return to the science of ethics.

Ethics is the systematic study of how humans ought to behave. The standard meaning of the Greek word *ethika*, as found in the title of Aristotle’s work, is “matters to do with character” — and we find in reading the *Ethics* that much of it is indeed devoted to character and the ways in which a character might be virtuous or vicious.

Arete and *eudaimonia* are two other Greek words whose translation merits some discussion. *Arete* is typically translated as “virtue,” but it is often better translated as “excellence.” For instance, one can speak meaningfully of a knife having *arete*, but a “virtuous knife” sounds distinctly odd in English; what is meant here is that the knife is *excellent*, that it performs its function well. So when Aristotle speaks of human virtue, remember that he has human excellence in mind. Finally, *eudaimonia* is typically translated as happiness, but this translation can also be misleading since the English word ‘happiness’ is sometimes understood to refer to a mere state of mind — and *eudaimonia* is never merely that. Perhaps a better translation of *eudaimonia* is “human flourishing.” When Aristotle considers the meaning of happiness, he is really considering what it means to flourish, to be successful in one’s life.

PRECISION IN ETHICS

Insofar as humans should make themselves excellent and to flourish, ethics is the science of human flourishing. And what exactly should we expect from this science of human flourishing? Guidance, but not with mathematical precision. As Aristotle famously points out,

precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions.... 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; it is equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs. [Bk. 1, ch. 3]

That we lack mathematical precision in ethics does not make it all a matter of opinion, without hopes of becoming a science (that is, a well-ordered body of knowledge). Consider the analogy of cabinet-making and framing a house. Expert cabinet-making might require keeping your measurements to the nearest $1/32^{\text{nd}}$ of an inch, but expert framing does not demand such precision; the nearest $1/4$ inch is all that is needed or desired. Being more precise will not result in a better house, and striving for such accuracy is not the mark of an expert craftsman, but rather one who misunderstands his craft. Just as we can build a fine house without measuring each wall stud to the nearest $1/32^{\text{nd}}$ of an inch, we can construct a perfectly useable science of morality, even though we lack the precision of a geometric proof.

DIFFERENT WAYS OF DESIRING THE GOOD

Aristotle begins his discussion of ethics with the observation that “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” [Bk. I, ch. 1]. In other words, the good is what we desire, and what we desire is a wide variety of products and activities. Insofar as we desire them, they are good in some sense: If we desire them for their own sake, then they are **final goods**; if we desire them for the sake of obtaining something else, then they are **instrumental goods**.

What Aristotle calls the **highest good** is that which we desire for its own sake, and never for the sake of another. As it turns out, there is such a highest good, and we all agree that it is called *eudaimonia* (happiness, flourishing): “both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and doing well with being happy” [Bk. I, ch. 4].

But what is happiness? Here we find great disagreement. Some say pleasure, others honor, and still others knowledge [ch. 5]. Determining the nature of happiness occupies a major portion of the *Ethics* — but then this topic is no small matter. Aristotle is asking here perhaps the most important question of our lives, a question with several forms but one subject: What is the successful human life? What is the good life? How ought I to live?

HAPPINESS, FUNCTION, AND VIRTUE

The *final good* is chosen for its own sake and is self-sufficient (it doesn’t need or desire anything else), and it turns out that *happiness* is both of these [ch. 7]; but what, exactly, is the *nature* of happiness? If we ask what it means for “a flute-player, a sculptor, or an artist” to flourish or be successful, we find that in answering this we must

first answer what it is that flute-players, sculptors, and artists are supposed to do — that is, we must first know what their function is. For them to be successful, they need to be able to perform their function well. So, before we can determine what counts as our happiness or flourishing, we must first determine our function — and not the function of this man or that woman, but the function common to *all* humans.

The **function** (Greek: *ergon*) of a thing is whatever that thing alone can do, or that it can do best. The function of humans, therefore, will need to be an activity natural to humans that either isn't found in other kinds of beings at all or, if found, does not occur to the same degree as it does in humans.

Aristotle works through his standard list of functions for living things (what he calls “souls” in his treatise, *On the Soul*), namely, nutrition and growth, perception, and reason. It is with this last activity that Aristotle feels he has found something unique to human beings. “The function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle” [Bk. I, ch. 7]. What Aristotle seems to mean by this is that our function is to order our lives according to reason.

Having located the human function, Aristotle concludes that human happiness consists in performing this function *well*, that is, to do it in an excellent or virtuous manner. Thus, human good is “an activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete” [ch. 7]; and again, “happiness is an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue” [ch. 13].

VIRTUE AND THE PARTS OF THE SOUL

Once Aristotle finds that virtue concerns the functioning of the soul, he turns to consider the soul's nature and finds that it has two parts or principles,

Virtue	Excellence in:	Acquired:	Aiming at:	Requiring:	Examples
Moral (character)	practical sphere	habit	intelligent conduct	<i>phronesis</i>	liberality, temperance
Intellectual	theoretical sphere	learning	discovering truth	experience and time	<i>sophia</i> , <i>phronesis</i>

one rational and the other irrational. The irrational part is itself divided in two: the *nutritive* part concerns the body's nutrition and growth, and the *appetitive* part concerns our desires. These two irrational parts differ also in that the appetitive part is susceptible to the influence of reason, “in so far as it listens to and obeys it” [ch. 13]. This suggests that reason plays two different roles in our lives, one practical and the other theoretical. *Practical reason* guides our appetites and emotions with correct principles of action, while *theoretical reason* works on its own, seeking truth.

Human virtue is to attain excellence in both the practical and the theoretical areas of reason's influence, and so we have two different sorts of virtue: **moral virtue** (or virtue of character), which concerns the influence of reason over the appetitive part of the soul, and **intellectual virtue**, which concerns the actions of the rational part of the soul insofar as it seeks truth. There are only two intellectual virtues — wisdom (*sophia*) and prudence (*phronesis*) — but a whole raft of the moral kind (liberality and temperance are two examples that he provides in chapter thirteen).

How do we acquire these virtues, once we decide this is the path of human flourishing? Aristotle turns to this question at the beginning of Book Two:

Intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name (*ethike*) is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word *ethos* (habit). From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature. For instance, the stone which by nature moves downwards cannot be habituated to move upwards, not even if one tries to train it by throwing it up ten thousand times; nor can fire be habituated to move downwards, nor can anything else that by nature behaves in one way be trained to behave in another. Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.

MORAL VIRTUE: HABITUALLY NAVIGATING BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS

The woman or man of moral virtue becomes virtuous through practice, by acting virtuously. But performing these actions is not sufficient for being virtuous. Aristotle notes that a person of virtue must also **perform the ac-**

tion in the right way: she must *know* that it is the virtuous thing to do (it can't be only coincidentally virtuous), she must choose the action for its own sake (and not as a means to some other end, such as glory, honor, pleasure, or wealth), and she must choose and act "from a firm and unchangeable character" (i.e., her virtuous actions must become habitual) [Bk. II, ch. 4]. Moral virtue, it turns out, is neither a passion nor a faculty, but rather a *state of character* (a disposition, the way that a person behaves habitually) [ch. 5]; in particular, moral virtue is that state of character which aims at the *intermediate* or *mean* between excess and deficiency [chs. 5-6].

One of the many trials of Odysseus during his return home from the Trojan War involved steering his ship between Scylla and Charybdis (traditionally understood as the Straits of Messina, between Sicily and the Italian peninsula). Scylla was a six-headed monster that ate sailors who ventured too close, while Charybdis was a huge mouth that gulped water, creating ship-devouring whirlpools. Steering a course between these two dangers was not easy, and Aristotle viewed the moral life as involving the same sort of challenge.

In nearly all that we do and in the way that we are, our actions and passions can suffer from either the **vice of deficiency** or the **vice of excess**. For instance, with respect to the passions of boldness and fear: if we follow boldness too much and fear too little, then we suffer the vice of being rash; if, on the other hand, we follow boldness too little and fear too much, we suffer the vice of being cowardly. The virtuous person aims for the intermediate between these two, which Aristotle calls *courage*. With respect to the desire to amuse others, *wittiness* is the virtue, while the vice of excess is buffoonery, and the vice of deficiency, boorishness. Aristotle offers dozens of such examples.

Aristotle also notes that some actions and passions have no mean or intermediate state, and so are always bad — for example, spite, envy, adultery, theft, or murder [ch. 6].

Finally, Aristotle points out that it is rarely easy to determine the proper mean, and thus to be good:

That moral virtue is a mean...has been sufficiently stated. Hence also it is no easy task to be good. For in everything 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 to do 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 every one, nor is it easy; wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble. [Bk. II, ch. 9]

Ethics does not enjoy the same level of precision as does physics or mathematics (as noted above). Nor is the mean the same with every person or in every situation. One cannot know in advance what the proper action or response will be, and therefore it is impossible to write a rule book of moral behavior, that we need simply consult. Determining the mean is an art of judgment, and doing this well requires practice and experience — it requires the practical wisdom (*phronesis*) that only experience can confer.

To help us out, Aristotle offers **three rules of thumb** (Bk. II, ch. 9). First, avoid that extreme which is furthest from the mean (in other words, pursue the lesser of the two evils). Second, pay attention to that extreme to which you are most attracted, and drag yourself in the opposite direction. Finally, always be on your guard against the pleasurable. While there is certainly nothing wrong with pleasure, we typically fail to judge actions impartially when pleasure is at stake, because pleasure is something toward which we all are naturally inclined, and so the risk of error is always higher here.

THE SUCCESSFUL LIFE

The successful life is the virtuous life, and the virtuous life is where we excel in being human, and what distinguishes us as human is the rational part of our souls. We have seen that this rational part of the soul — reason — is both practical and theoretical: *practical* insofar as it restrains our appetites and guides our conduct, and *theoretical* insofar as it participates in the theoretical sciences (seeking truth regardless of practical application). Because the theoretical use of reason is the most pure use (since it is reason operating all alone, and not mixing with the appetites), the most flourishing life of all is one devoted to the intellectual virtues — a life, in other words, devoted to learning. This may not strike the average college student as a point of comfort — that what they are doing right now is the best that any human could ever hope for — but that's how Aristotle viewed the matter.