

Aristotle

Nicomachean Ethics

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Objectives

1. Describe Aristotle's conception of eudaimonia (a good life or happiness for human beings)
2. Consider Aristotle's argument in favour of the view that reason plays an essential role in a good human life.
3. Identify the differences between character virtues and intellectual virtues.
4. Consider Aristotle's doctrine of the mean as it relates to character virtues.
5. Describe Aristotle's solution to the problem of incontinence (akrasia).

Commentary

Introduction

[Aristotle of Stagira](#) (384-322 BC) is one of the most important philosophers in the Western world. He has made fundamental contributions in Ethics, Politics, Logic, Metaphysics, and the Philosophy of Mind, as well as in other disciplines, most notably the study of nature and literary criticism. In his view, ethics differs from theoretical sciences in that it is concerned with a practical question: What is a good life for human beings? Aristotle's ethics played an important role in the revival of [virtue ethics](#) in contemporary moral philosophy, which commenced with the publication of [Elizabeth Anscombe's](#) paper, 'Modern Moral Philosophy' in 1958. The focus of this article is on the *Nicomachean Ethics (NE)*, which is widely assumed to be a later and improved version of the *Eudemian Ethics*.

Eudaimonia: A good life for human beings (NE Book I)

Aristotle begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* by noting that all our activities and pursuits are goal-directed. That is, they are aimed at something we take to be good. The task of ethical inquiry is to answer the question: What is the ultimate end or goal of human life? He refers to this ultimate end as *eudaimonia* (a good or happy life for human beings), and is interested in discovering how particular good things, such as pleasure, knowledge, friendship, and virtue, fit into a good life.

Aristotle notes that people have different views about the good life. Some people equate it with pleasure, or honour, or wealth, and a few wise people think the best life for human beings is a life of contemplation, that is, a life devoted to the pursuit of knowledge. A person's assumptions about the good life guide their decisions about a whole range of things, such as what (and how much) to eat and drink, how to earn a living, whose company to seek out, how to spend your free time, and so on. It is tempting to think that conceptions of happiness are subjective and relative to the individual, such that one's happiness will consist in the successful pursuit of whatever one takes to be a good life. But Aristotle disagrees. He thinks it is a mistake to equate happiness with pleasure, honour, or wealth, and the implication of having such a mistaken conception of the good is that all one's actions and pursuits will be misguided. As such, ethical inquiry, unlike theoretical (or scientific) inquiry, has an important practical purpose: to learn how to live well.

The Function Argument (NE Book I.vii)

To answer the question about the nature of the good human life Aristotle starts by asking what the function (*ergon* or characteristic activity) of human beings is. He explains this approach by noting that all things have a function, and a good or excellent example of its kind would be one that performs this function well. For example, the function of a flutist is to play the flute (to make music), and a good flutist is someone who plays the flute well. The virtues of a flutist are the qualities or excellences that allow them to play the flute well. Similarly, he argues that a good human is someone who functions well as a human being, and the virtues or excellences (*arete*) of a human being are the qualities that allow them to perform this function well.

To identify the function of human beings Aristotle draws on his theory of the human soul (psychology), which he develops more fully in *De Anima (On the Soul)*. He uses the term soul to refer to the ways of behaving and thinking that we find in humans. First, humans have a *vegetative* soul, that is, we are capable of growth and reproduction. Someone can function well or poorly in this respect, but Aristotle argues that this cannot be the characteristic activity of human beings because we share it with all living things (plants and animals). Second, humans have a *perceptive* soul, that is, we have the capacity for sense-perception (vision, hearing, smell, and so on). But again, Aristotle argues that a good human life cannot consist in functioning well in this regard, for we share the capacity for perception with other animals. What sets human beings apart from the rest of nature is the *rational* soul – the capacity for rational activity. Unlike animals, we have the ability to attain knowledge and to guide ourselves using reason. Therefore, functioning well as a human being – human happiness – consists in rational activity. Further, the virtues for human beings are those qualities that allow us think and act rationally.

Intellectual and Character virtues

Aristotle makes a distinction between intellectual (or epistemic) virtues and character virtues. [*Intellectual virtues*](#) pertain to the rational part of the soul and include theoretical wisdom, science, intuitive reason, craft expertise, and practical wisdom (Book VII). [*Character virtues*](#), such as courage, temperance, liberality, and magnanimity, pertain to the appetitive soul – the part that governs our appetites or desires. The appetitive soul doesn't participate in reasoning, but Aristotle thinks it is capable of listening to reason (NE 1102b31). Thus, for example, the virtue of temperance involves indulging in bodily pleasures only to the extent deemed appropriate by reason (Books II to V).

The Doctrine of the Mean (NE Book II.vi-vii)

Aristotle develops the doctrine of the mean in the course of discussing the character virtues. He claims that each virtue is associated with a particular feeling or emotion, and that this is what distinguishes the virtues from each other. For instance, temperance is associated with bodily pleasures, courage is associated with fear and confidence, and good temper (or patience) is associated with anger. The virtues are dispositions (or tendencies) to have appropriate feelings and to act in appropriate ways (1105b25-26). More specifically, they are dispositions to rationally choose a mean between excess and defect regarding these feelings and actions. The virtue of temperance is a mean between an excess (the vice of greed – the disposition to enjoy and indulge in food and drink too much) and a defect (the vice of insensibility – the disposition to take too little pleasure and indulge too little in these things). Courage, in turn, is a mean between the vices of cowardice (the tendency to be too fearful, and hence to flee from every danger) and foolishness or rashness (the tendency to fear too little, and hence not to avoid danger). The doctrine of the mean offers a useful way of thinking

about [virtues and vices](#), but it should not be seen as a method or procedure for making decisions about how to act in a particular situation.

Aristotle supports the doctrine of the mean by claiming that it is in the nature of things to be destroyed by deficiency and excess. An excess or deficiency of food destroys bodily health, just as an excess or deficiency of exercise can destroy bodily strength. The right amount of food for a person will lie somewhere between excess and deficiency, the amount differing relative to the constitution of the individual. Aristotle thinks something similar can be said about our feelings and emotional reactions. Some of us have a tendency to feel too much shame (the vice of bashfulness) and others tend not to feel enough shame (the vice of shamelessness). Modesty is the virtue that involves feeling the right amount of shame.

Virtuous Action and Practical Wisdom

The virtues are dispositions to act in certain ways, and these dispositions are acquired through practice, that is, by engaging in proper conduct in specific situations. Aristotle emphasises that the virtues involve rational conduct. Being virtuous requires thinking about what one does, carefully considering one's options, and acting for the right reasons. Aristotle claims that that ethical reasoning differs from theoretical or scientific reasoning in that it doesn't involve applying general rules or laws to particular situations. (He would therefore reject [consequentialist](#) and [deontological](#) approaches to ethical decision-making.) Instead, the virtuous agent relies on practical wisdom or [prudence](#) (*phronesis*), and chooses the action that is appropriate in the circumstances.

Practical wisdom, according to Aristotle, is an intellectual virtue that is concerned with acting well. He defines it as 'a state of grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about things that are good or bad for a human being' (NE 1140b5). It is necessary for the possession of every character virtue. In the case of temperance, for example, practical wisdom discerns and directs one towards the mean between greed and insensibility. Whether enjoying a certain amount of food and drink constitutes an excess or a defect will depend on the bodily needs, health status, and activity levels of the particular individual. It will also depend on the circumstances. For example, it is not greedy to eat or drink more than usual at a celebration party or when someone has made a special effort. Similarly, in the case of courage, for example, practical wisdom allows someone to judge when courage tends towards rashness (e.g. risking one's life for a worthless goal) or cowardice (e.g. refusing to make a sacrifice for the sake of a worthy goal). Making these judgments requires a correct understanding of which things are good or worthwhile, and this kind of understanding cannot be captured in a set of rules or taught to children. It is only gained through experience, which is why young people cannot be fully virtuous.

Reason and Emotion, Contenance and Incontinence

Moral excellence (virtue) is concerned with pleasure and pain (1104b). Pleasure and pain are the primary motivators of human action – we are inclined towards pleasure and away from pain. Aristotle argues that a virtuous person is someone who feels pleasure and pain at the right time, in the right amount, towards the right objects and in the right way. They take pleasure from doing good acts, and feel pain when they witness acts of injustice, cruelty, or cowardice. Taking pleasure in doing virtuous acts is a sign that the right attitude towards pleasures and pains has been acquired.

Aristotle claims that all human beings are born with the *potential* to exhibit virtue, but that whether we realise that potential depends upon environmental factors. We acquire intellectual virtues through teaching, but character virtues can only be acquired through practice. We form good habits by

imitating the actions of virtuous role models, but good habits only become virtues when we understand – and are motivated by – the right reasons. Thus, the desires of a virtuous person are in harmony with their reason: they don't have to struggle against contrary inclinations or feelings. When they have decided what to do, they do it gladly, and feel satisfied having done it (1120a 24-31).

Aristotle contrasts the virtuous person with the one that is merely continent or self-controlled (*enkratês*). The continent person knows what is right, but is often tempted by emotions and appetites to do otherwise. Despite this, he usually manages to resist temptation and do as reason commands. The continent person is less admirable than the virtuous person, but more admirable than someone who is incontinent (*akratês*). An incontinent person is someone who knows what to do, but usually fails to resist the temptation to do wrong. The worst kind of person is the one who doesn't even know what is right and has no desire to act accordingly. Such a person is evil or vicious. They don't recognize the value of kindness, justice, or temperance, and are driven by desires for wealth, power, and luxury.

The Problem of Incontinence (*akrasia*) (Book VII.1-3)

The phenomenon of incontinence presents us with an interesting [problem](#): How is it possible to knowingly act in ways that are contrary to one's own good? For example, if we know it is bad for us to over-indulge in food or wine, why do we nevertheless do it? An obvious answer is that passion (emotion or desire) is sometimes a stronger motivational force than reason. [Socrates](#) considers this response in Plato's *Protagoras* (351b-558d) but insists that there is nothing more powerful than knowledge. He argues that the person who appears to be incontinent is actually ignorant; they don't really know what is good or bad. In this view, genuine incontinence does not exist.

Aristotle rejects this solution, on the grounds that it contradicts the undeniable fact that incontinence exists: the incontinent person knows what he does is bad, but is overcome by passion. Aristotle distinguishes between two forms of incontinence: impetuosity (*propeteis*) and weakness (*astheneia*). A weak person often deliberates and makes a choice, but then goes on to act under the influence of passion. By contrast, an impetuous person often acts under the influence of passion, without even making a reasoned choice, but then goes on to regret what they have done. In both forms of incontinence the agent experiences inner conflict, with reason competing – and losing – against passion. Aristotle compares the incontinent person to someone who is drunk or asleep: in a general sense they know that something is not good for them, but their reasoning at the time of action is impaired. Incontinence is therefore the result of an intellectual failure, but one that is brought about by passion. Unlike Socrates, then, Aristotle acknowledges that the passions have the power to weaken or bypass reason. In the case of weakness, passion is a force that keeps reason from fully exercising its power. And in the case of impetuosity, passion is so powerful that it prevents reason from entering into the arena of conscious reflection.

Friendliness and Friendship (*philia*)

In Book IV.vi Aristotle discusses friendship (friendliness or amiability) as a virtue that relates to one's attitude towards others' pain and pleasure. It is a mean between a deficiency (not caring enough about the pain one causes others) and an excess (caring too much about the pain one causes others). The deficiency can manifest as either surliness (unfriendliness) or quarrelsomeness (objecting or disagreeing with everything). The defect can take the form of obsequiousness (backing down too easily, even when it is dishonourable to do so) or flattery (trying too hard to please others in order to benefit oneself). The virtue of friendliness involves having the right attitude towards others' pleasure and pain, and is exercised in dealings with different types of people (friends, family members, strangers, and so on.)

In Books VIII and XI Aristotle gives a detailed account of [friendship](#) as an important part of the good life. His aim is to support the link between virtue and happiness by showing that virtuous people can participate in a more rewarding and worthwhile form of friendship. He uses the term in a broad sense to refer to all relationships between equals, but then distinguishes between three kinds of friendship. The first is based on usefulness or utility, where both parties derive some benefit from the other. The second kind is based on pleasure, where each person enjoys the other's company because of their good looks, wit, or charm, or because they enjoy a shared activity. Although Aristotle accepts that these utility and pleasure friendships have a place in the life of a virtuous person, he argues that they are not true or ideal forms of friendship given that the friends form and maintain the relationship only because (and for as long as) it benefits them in some way. The only true form of friendship is based on character or virtue, where both people admire and appreciate the other's goodness and support and encourage their pursuit of happiness. These friendships tend to be more enduring, given that the friends love each other for their own sake rather than merely as a means to pleasure or utility. Aristotle argues that this kind of friendship is rare, for it is only possible if both parties are – and remain – virtuous. The non-virtuous can only be friends for reasons of utility or pleasure, for they don't really care about or take pleasure in each other.

The Life of Contemplation (Book X.7-8)

In Book X, Aristotle returns to the question he raised in Book I: What is the best life for human beings? He considers three contenders: The first is a life of pleasure. He accepts that a good life contains pleasure, but argues that it cannot be the ultimate end in life. The pleasures that come from relaxation and entertainment can only play a secondary role, because we seek out these pleasures only to return to more important or worthwhile activities. He also notes that there are different forms of pleasure, associated with contemplation, sight, hearing and smell, and taste. Some pleasures are to be pursued more than others, and some are to be avoided as they are base or corrupt. We therefore need a standard whereby to judge pleasures – the judgment of the virtuous person.

The second is a life lived in accordance with the character virtues. He refers to it as a life of politics. The third is the life of a philosopher – someone who possesses theoretical wisdom. Given that the bulk of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is devoted to a discussion of the character virtues, one expects Aristotle to conclude that the best life for human beings is a life of politics. But he comes to a different conclusion. He accepts that a life of virtuous activity is good. But he goes on to argue that a life of contemplation – one devoted to the pursuit of knowledge – is the best life for human beings. Once they have a full understanding of the causal principles that govern the operation of the natural world, the philosopher lives a life that is godlike. Whereas character virtues are exercised occasionally, the philosopher can engage in rational contemplation continuously and endlessly. Further, whereas the character virtues are exercised in the course of warfare and political life, contemplation is pursued entirely for its own sake. Some scholars argue that Book X.7-8 are at odds with the rest of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, for they take Aristotle to reverse his previous views by implying that the philosopher need not possess or manifest the character virtues in order to live the best life for human beings. Others argue that Aristotle's views on the contemplative life are consistent with the views developed earlier on. Richard Kraut (1989) argues that Aristotle's philosopher will need to have the virtue of practical wisdom as well as the character virtues in order to live a life of thought and discussion, even though exercising these virtues is not their ultimate aim in life.

Questions for Self-Review

1. What is the link between virtue and the good life (*eudaimonia* or happiness) in Aristotle's Ethics?
2. Explain the doctrine of the mean, and consider whether it can be used as a decision-making tool.
3. What is practical wisdom, and why is it necessary for all the character virtues?
4. What is Aristotle's solution to the problem of incontinence (*akrasia*)?
5. Why is a life of contemplation superior to a life lived in accordance with the character virtues?

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