

Nicomachean Ethics by Aristotle

Posted on May 4, 2018

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is one of the foundational works of moral philosophy. Written in the fourth century BCE and arranged in ten books, it asks what the highest human good is and how a person can live well. The work is traditionally associated with Aristotle's son Nicomachus, although the exact origin of the title and the editorial history are uncertain. W. D. Ross produced an influential English translation for Oxford, and later editors revised it, but the philosophical importance of the text does not depend on one translation. Different translations render key Greek terms differently, making attention to concepts such as *eudaimonia*, *aretē*, *phronēsis*, and *mesotēs* essential (Aristotle).

The original essay correctly identifies happiness, virtue, reason, and political life as central Aristotelian concerns, but several claims need refinement. Aristotle does not present only four virtues, and wisdom is not simply "choosing the mean path." His classification of monarchy, aristocracy, polity, tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy is developed principally in the *Politics*, not as the organizing subject of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The Ethics focuses on character, choice, responsibility, friendship, pleasure, justice, practical wisdom, and contemplation. It ends by directing the reader toward political study because laws and institutions help cultivate virtuous citizens.

The Aim of Human Action

Aristotle begins by observing that every craft, inquiry, action, and choice appears to aim at some good. Medicine aims at health, shipbuilding at a vessel, strategy at victory, and economic activity at resources. Some goals are pursued as means to other goals. If every aim were only a means, desire would continue without a final point. Aristotle therefore asks whether there is a highest good desired for its own sake.

Most people call this good happiness, but the English word can suggest a passing mood. The Greek *eudaimonia* is better understood as flourishing, living well, or doing well across a complete life. A person can feel pleasure temporarily while living badly overall. Aristotle's ethical question concerns the shape and quality of an entire human life.

The Function Argument

Aristotle reasons that the good of a thing is related to its characteristic function. The function of a flute player is to play the flute, and the excellent flute player performs that activity well. Human beings share nutrition with plants and perception with animals, so the distinctively human function involves rational activity.

He concludes that the human good is activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are several virtues, in accordance with the best and most complete, over a complete life. This formulation makes flourishing active. It is not a possession stored inside a person and not merely a feeling produced by external events. A person flourishes by exercising capacities excellently through sustained choices and actions.

A Complete Life and External Goods

Aristotle does not claim that virtue alone makes every person fully happy regardless of circumstances. Severe misfortune, isolation, poverty, illness, loss, or political oppression can obstruct activity. Friends, resources, health, and some favorable conditions support flourishing. This makes his ethics less detached from material life than theories that locate goodness entirely in intention.

External goods are not the highest good because wealth, status, and power can be used badly. They are instruments and conditions. A flourishing life requires appropriate relation to them rather than unlimited accumulation. Aristotle also emphasizes time: one fortunate day does not make a life complete, and a person's character is demonstrated through sustained activity.

Moral and Intellectual Virtues

Aristotle divides virtue broadly into moral and intellectual forms. Intellectual virtues develop primarily through teaching and experience. They include scientific knowledge, technical skill, practical wisdom, intuitive understanding, and philosophical wisdom. Moral virtues develop through habituation. People become just by doing just acts, courageous by practicing courageous action, and temperate by practicing restraint.

Habituation does not mean mechanical repetition without thought. Actions form desires and perception. A well-educated person learns to take pleasure in what is noble and to feel aversion toward what is shameful. Character shapes what appears worth pursuing. Ethics therefore begins before abstract theory, through upbringing, law, example, and practice.

The Doctrine of the Mean

Moral virtue is often described as a mean between excess and deficiency relative to the person and determined by reason. Courage lies between cowardice and rashness; temperance between insensibility and self-indulgence; proper pride between vanity and undue humility. The mean is not an arithmetic midpoint or a rule to behave moderately in every circumstance.

The right action depends on person, object, time, motive, manner, and context. Giving ten dollars may be generous for one person and inadequate or reckless for another. Anger can be appropriate

when directed at the right wrong, in the right amount, and for the right reason. Practical wisdom identifies what the situation requires.

Some actions do not have a virtuous mean because their very description includes wrongness. Aristotle gives examples such as adultery, theft, and murder. One cannot commit them at the right time or in the right amount merely by choosing moderation. The doctrine of the mean is therefore not moral compromise between good and evil.

Courage

Courage concerns fear and confidence, especially in relation to serious danger. The courageous person recognizes the danger but faces it for a noble reason. Cowardice involves excessive fear or deficient confidence, while rashness involves excessive confidence or insufficient fear. Courage is not absence of fear because a person who perceives no danger may not be courageous at all.

Aristotle distinguishes true courage from actions motivated by compulsion, ignorance, anger, experience, or desire for reputation. These motives can resemble courage externally while lacking its complete ethical character. The distinction shows that virtue depends on why and how an action is chosen, not merely on visible behavior.

Temperance

Temperance concerns bodily pleasures, particularly touch and taste. The temperate person enjoys appropriate pleasures without becoming ruled by them. Self-indulgence allows appetite to override reason, while insensibility involves an unusual deficiency in normal enjoyment.

Temperance does not require hostility toward the body. Pleasure is part of human life, and Aristotle later argues that good activity has its proper pleasure. The problem arises when desire loses proportion and damages health, relationships, responsibility, or judgment.

Generosity and Magnificence

Generosity concerns giving and taking wealth. The generous person gives the right amount to the right people for worthy purposes and does not treat wealth as the highest good. Wastefulness and stinginess are opposed failures, though they operate differently.

Magnificence concerns large expenditures, such as public works, religious festivals, or major hospitality in Aristotle's social context. It illustrates that the mean is relative to scale and position. Modern readers should examine the elitist assumptions of ancient Greek society while preserving the insight that ethical spending depends on purpose, proportion, and community.

Justice

Justice receives extended treatment because it concerns relation with others and can be understood as complete virtue expressed socially. General justice means lawfulness and conduct oriented toward the common good. Particular justice concerns fair distribution and correction of wrongs.

Distributive justice allocates honors, wealth, or resources according to a relevant proportional standard. Corrective justice addresses unequal loss and gain in transactions or injuries and seeks restoration. Aristotle's account is historically limited by the exclusions of his society, but it established influential distinctions in legal and political thought.

Equity corrects the rigid application of general law when the lawmaker could not anticipate a particular case. The equitable judge honors the law's purpose rather than exploiting its literal wording. This insight recognizes that universal rules sometimes require practical interpretation.

Voluntary Action and Responsibility

Moral evaluation depends on whether an action is voluntary. Aristotle examines compulsion, ignorance, choice, wish, and deliberation. An action is involuntary when it results from external force or from ignorance followed by regret under relevant conditions. Mixed actions, such as throwing cargo overboard during a storm, are chosen under pressure and require contextual judgment.

Choice concerns means within a person's power rather than impossible ends. People wish for health but deliberate about diet, treatment, exercise, and other means. Character influences deliberation, yet repeated voluntary choices also form character. Aristotle's account therefore connects responsibility with habit without assuming that every person begins from equal circumstances.

Practical Wisdom

Practical wisdom, or *phronēsis*, is the intellectual virtue that enables good deliberation about action and the human good. It is not merely cleverness. A clever person can efficiently pursue a corrupt goal, while practical wisdom requires a right end shaped by moral virtue (Kraut).

Moral virtue and practical wisdom depend on one another. Good character directs desire toward worthy ends, and practical wisdom identifies appropriate means in particular situations. Rules alone cannot resolve every ethical problem because circumstances vary. Experienced perception is therefore part of ethical expertise.

Continence and Incontinence

Aristotle examines people who know what they should do but act against their judgment because of appetite. The continent person experiences improper desire but controls it, while the incontinent person is overcome. The virtuous person has a more harmonious character and desires the appropriate action.

This analysis challenges the claim that knowledge automatically produces good behavior. A person can state a moral principle without possessing it actively at the moment of choice. Emotion, habit, intoxication, and attention affect action. Ethical education must therefore shape desire, not only provide information.

Friendship

Books VIII and IX devote extensive attention to friendship because a flourishing life is social. Aristotle identifies friendships of utility, pleasure, and virtue. Utility friendships exist because each person provides benefit; pleasure friendships because each enjoys the other; and virtue friendships because each values the other's character and wishes the other good for that person's sake.

Utility and pleasure friendships are not necessarily false, but they may end when the benefit or enjoyment ends. Complete friendship requires time, trust, shared activity, and relatively virtuous people. Friends help one another exercise virtue and understand themselves.

Aristotle also considers unequal friendships, political community, family, self-love, and conflict. Proper self-love is not selfish acquisition but commitment to noble action. A good person may sacrifice external advantage for a friend while achieving the nobler act.

Pleasure

Aristotle rejects the view that all pleasure is bad and the view that pleasure is the highest good. Pleasure completes an activity as a kind of fulfillment. Good activities have appropriate pleasures, while corrupt activities can also feel pleasant to a badly formed character.

Evaluating pleasure therefore requires evaluating the activity and the person. The pleasure of learning, friendship, or just action differs from pleasure obtained through exploitation. Flourishing includes pleasure because excellent activity is desirable, not because ethical life is an unpleasant sacrifice.

Contemplation

Book X presents contemplation as the highest activity because it exercises the best element in human beings, can be sustained, aims at truth, and is valued for its own sake. Philosophical contemplation appears more self-sufficient than practical action and resembles divine activity.

This conclusion creates tension with the earlier emphasis on moral virtue, friendship, and political life. Interpreters debate whether Aristotle presents one dominant highest activity or a flourishing life containing several goods. Even the contemplative person remains human and needs external goods, community, and moral development. The text should not be reduced to withdrawal from society.

Ethics and Politics

Aristotle calls the political art architectonic because it organizes the conditions under which citizens live and learn. Ethics studies individual flourishing, but individuals develop within families, laws, education, and constitutions. The final chapter argues that theory alone does not make people good; habituation and law are necessary.

The original essay's discussion of government forms belongs mainly to the *Politics*. Aristotle distinguishes correct regimes directed toward the common good from deviant regimes serving rulers' private interests. Monarchy can deviate into tyranny, aristocracy into oligarchy, and polity into a self-interested form of democracy in his technical classification. Modern democracy differs greatly from the ancient system he criticized, and his political thought excluded women, enslaved people, and many workers from full citizenship.

Human Beings as Political Animals

Aristotle's statement that the human being is a political animal also appears centrally in the *Politics*. Humans possess speech capable of communicating justice, advantage, and good, enabling complex community. The polis is not merely a place for survival but a setting in which citizens pursue a good life.

Modern readers can retain the insight that flourishing depends on relationships and institutions while rejecting ancient exclusions. Humans develop language, identity, responsibility, and capability through communities. Isolation can obstruct the exercise of many virtues.

Aristotle's Empirical Method

The original essay describes Aristotle as more scientist than philosopher and as strictly materialistic.

Aristotle conducted extensive observation in biology and often began inquiry from commonly held beliefs and appearances. He sought causes and classifications and influenced later science. Yet he was also a metaphysician, logician, and philosopher who discussed form, purpose, soul, and the divine.

His account of knowledge is not simply that all truth comes from five-sense observation. Experience supports understanding, but intellect grasps principles and explanations. Calling him the founder of a modern separation between science and religion projects later European history backward. His thought belongs to an ancient framework in which natural, ethical, metaphysical, and theological inquiry were connected.

Virtue and Emotion

Virtue does not eliminate emotion. Fear, anger, desire, pity, and pleasure can be felt appropriately or inappropriately. The virtuous person responds at the right time, toward the right object, for the right reason, and in the right manner. Ethical formation educates emotion through reason and habit.

This approach differs from judging morality only through rule compliance. Two people may perform the same act while one acts reluctantly for praise and the other acts from stable concern for justice. Character gives action its ethical depth.

Luck, Inequality, and Criticism

Aristotle recognizes that external fortune affects flourishing but does not fully address structural injustice by modern standards. His ethics reflects the perspective of free male citizens with leisure and social position. Enslaved people and women were denied equal status in his political writings. These limitations should be confronted rather than excused as irrelevant.

At the same time, his concepts of habit, practical judgment, friendship, and activity continue to support contemporary debates about education, professions, leadership, and well-being. A philosophical text can contain enduring insights and serious historical injustice.

Application to Professional Life

Virtue ethics asks not only which rule applies but what kind of professional a person is becoming. A nurse develops compassion and practical judgment, a judge develops justice, a manager develops fairness and courage, and a researcher develops honesty and intellectual humility. Repeated actions form habits and organizational cultures.

The doctrine of the mean does not permit compromising safety or integrity. It helps professionals

calibrate confidence, candor, risk, and emotion according to context. Practical wisdom combines evidence, experience, purpose, and attention to individuals.

Application to Personal Flourishing

Modern culture often equates happiness with pleasure, income, popularity, or positive feeling. Aristotle asks whether a person's activities express excellence across a complete life. This perspective values relationships, meaningful work, learning, civic participation, and character.

Flourishing is not a private achievement independent of society. Education, health, safety, time, and political institutions affect the activities available. Contemporary use of Aristotle should therefore connect personal responsibility with social conditions rather than blame individuals for every misfortune.

Conclusion

The *Nicomachean Ethics* defines the highest human good as *eudaimonia*, a complete life of rational activity in accordance with virtue. Happiness is not a temporary emotion or possession. It is expressed through action, character, friendship, practical judgment, pleasure in worthy activities, and sufficient external conditions.

Aristotle distinguishes moral virtues developed through habit from intellectual virtues developed through teaching and experience. The doctrine of the mean describes appropriate response between excess and deficiency, but it is not an arithmetic compromise. Practical wisdom determines what a particular situation requires. Justice, responsibility, friendship, continence, pleasure, and contemplation complete the account.

The original essay is right that Aristotle connects ethics with political and social life, but the classification of regimes belongs principally to the *Politics*. He was neither merely a scientist nor a simple materialist, and he recognizes more than four virtues. His ancient exclusions require criticism, yet his central question remains urgent: what activities, habits, relationships, and institutions allow human beings to live well rather than merely pursue momentary desire?

Works Cited

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by W. D. Ross, revised by Lesley Brown, Oxford University Press, 2009.

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin, 3rd ed., Hackett Publishing, 2019.

Kraut, Richard. *Aristotle on the Human Good*. Princeton University Press, 1989.