

Nicomachean Ethics by Aristotle

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Introduction

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* asks one of moral philosophy's most enduring questions: what does it mean for a human being to live well? Aristotle begins from the observation that actions, crafts, and choices aim at goods, but many goods are pursued only as means to something further. He therefore searches for a highest end desired for its own sake and identifies it as *eudaimonia*, commonly translated as happiness, flourishing, or living well. This is not a temporary feeling of pleasure. It is the quality of a complete life expressed through rational activity in accordance with virtue (Aristotle, 2009). The work develops this idea through discussions of character, responsibility, practical wisdom, justice, friendship, pleasure, and contemplation. Moral life is not reduced to following rules because good action depends on habits, motives, perception, and circumstances. Aristotle's account is historically limited by the social inequalities of ancient Greece, yet its central insight remains influential: human flourishing is something practiced through sustained activity rather than possessed as a mood or material object.

Eudaimonia and the Function of Human Life

Aristotle's "function argument" connects human excellence with the activity characteristic of human beings. Nutrition is shared with plants and sensation with other animals, so he locates the distinctive human function in rational activity. The good human life is therefore activity of the soul in accordance with virtue over a complete life. This formulation matters because flourishing is active. A person does not become fulfilled merely by owning wealth, possessing intelligence, or experiencing pleasure; these may support good activity without constituting its highest form. Aristotle also refuses the idea that character alone makes external circumstances irrelevant. Health, friendship, resources, political stability, and freedom from extreme misfortune can affect a person's ability to act well. External goods are therefore conditions or instruments rather than the ultimate end. This balance distinguishes Aristotle from both hedonism and theories that locate morality entirely inside good intentions. A flourishing life requires excellent activity, but that activity occurs within social and material circumstances that can either support or obstruct the exercise of human capacities.

Virtue, Habit, and the Doctrine of the Mean

Aristotle distinguishes broadly between intellectual virtues developed through teaching and experience and moral virtues developed through habituation. People become courageous by repeatedly facing fear well, just by performing just actions, and temperate by learning to regulate desire. Habituation is not mindless repetition; it shapes what people notice, enjoy, fear, and value. Moral virtue is famously described as a mean between excess and deficiency relative to the person and determined by reason. Courage lies between cowardice and rashness, while generosity lies between stinginess and wastefulness. The mean is not an arithmetic midpoint and does not imply compromise between right and wrong. Appropriate action depends on who is acting, toward whom, at what time, for what reason, and in what manner. Some actions, such as theft or deliberate injustice, are wrong by their nature and do not become virtuous through moderation. The doctrine of the mean is therefore a theory of proportionate response guided by good judgment rather than a rule that everyone should always choose the middle option.

Choice, Responsibility, and Practical Wisdom

Ethical judgment requires attention to whether actions are voluntary. Aristotle distinguishes compulsion, ignorance, wish, deliberation, and choice because praise and blame depend partly on whether a person could act differently. Some actions are mixed: a sailor who throws cargo overboard during a storm acts under pressure but still chooses a course within constrained circumstances. Such cases require contextual evaluation rather than simple labels. Practical wisdom, or *phronēsis*, is the intellectual virtue that allows a person to deliberate well about action. It is not the same as cleverness because a clever person can pursue a corrupt goal efficiently. Practical wisdom works with moral virtue: good character directs desire toward worthy ends, while practical judgment identifies suitable means in a particular situation. Rules are important, but no rule can anticipate every circumstance. Ethical maturity therefore involves experience and perception. A practically wise person recognizes which features of a situation are morally significant and understands how general principles should be applied without losing sight of their purpose (Kraut, 1989).

Justice and Friendship

Justice receives special attention because it concerns how individuals relate to others and to the political community. Aristotle distinguishes broad justice, associated with lawful conduct and the common good, from particular forms involving distribution and correction. Distributive justice concerns the allocation of benefits and burdens according to a relevant proportional standard, while corrective justice attempts to restore balance after wrongful loss or gain. His concept of equity recognizes that a general law may need interpretation when applying its literal wording would defeat the purpose for which the rule was created. Books VIII and IX then turn to friendship because

flourishing is fundamentally social. Aristotle distinguishes friendships of utility, pleasure, and virtue. Utility and pleasure friendships are genuine but depend on benefits or enjoyment that may change. Complete friendship is more stable because each person values the other's character and wishes the other good for that person's own sake. Friendship supports self-knowledge, ethical development, and shared activity, showing that Aristotle's ideal is not solitary self-perfection but excellence practiced within relationships.

Pleasure, Contemplation, and Political Life

Aristotle rejects both the claim that pleasure is always bad and the claim that it is the highest good. Pleasure can complete an activity when the activity itself is worthwhile; the pleasure of learning or friendship differs ethically from pleasure taken in exploitation. Book X then presents contemplation as the highest activity because it exercises the most intellectual part of human nature and can be valued for its own sake. This conclusion creates interpretive tension with the earlier emphasis on friendship, justice, and practical virtue. A contemplative person remains human and still needs relationships, character, and external conditions. The *Ethics* ends by turning toward politics because individuals are formed through education, law, family, and institutions. The detailed classification of monarchy, aristocracy, polity, tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy belongs mainly to Aristotle's *Politics*, but the connection is important. Ethical development is not merely private. Communities help cultivate or undermine the habits that make good action possible, which is why questions of character inevitably lead to questions about social and political organization.

Conclusion

The *Nicomachean Ethics* presents human flourishing as a complete life of rational and virtuous activity rather than a temporary feeling, possession, or external success. Moral virtues are formed through habit, intellectual virtues through learning and experience, and practical wisdom joins good ends with appropriate action in concrete circumstances. The doctrine of the mean explains proportionate response without reducing ethics to arithmetic moderation. Justice shows how virtue operates socially, while friendship reveals that flourishing depends on relationships in which people support one another's development. Pleasure can accompany good activity without becoming the ultimate goal, and contemplation represents the fullest exercise of intellect within a life that still requires community and external conditions. Aristotle's work also contains limitations that modern readers should confront, including assumptions rooted in ancient social hierarchy and exclusion. Those flaws do not erase the continuing value of his central question. Virtue ethics remains influential because it asks not only "What rule should I follow?" but also "What kind of person am I becoming through the choices, habits, relationships, and institutions that shape my life?"

Works Cited

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