

# Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics

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ἀρετή

Areté

Virtue

Excellence

Goodness

# Εὐδαιμονία : The highest aim of humans



## Eudaimonia

- Defined as happiness, living well, flourishing
- It is that thing which we desire for itself and not for any other end.
- It requires a proper balance or sufficient quantity of four things: Honor (having friends), Fortune, Pleasure and Virtue.

# Eudaimonia: Honor, Fortune & Pleasure

- Health, wealth, and other such resources—are sought because they promote well-being, not because they are what well-being consists in.
- “*Luck loves virtue*” (Aristotle quoting someone else - could be Hesiod or Euripides) These elements may be due in a good part to luck but are also closely tied to proper outcomes of consistently virtuous action.
- These elements are necessary only because “someone who is friendless, childless, powerless, weak, and ugly will simply not be able to find many opportunities for virtuous activity over a long period of time, and what little he can accomplish will not be of great merit.”

(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)



# Eudaimonia: Virtue and Reason

- Aristotle argues that the highest end of humans consists in “activity of the rational part of the soul in accordance with perfect virtue.”
- “...what sets humanity off from other species, giving us the potential to live a better life, is our capacity to guide ourselves by using reason. If we use reason well, we live well as human beings.”

(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

# Virtue (Arete/ ἀρετή)

## Definitions:

1. Acting with excellence
2. An activity of the rational part of the soul
3. Reason excellently applied
4. The means between the extremes

## Two kinds of virtues:

- Practical or Moral – “the result of habit or custom”
- Intellectual – which “owes its birth and growth mainly to instruction and so requires time and experience.”





# Virtue : Reason Excellently Applied

## Sophia (σοφία)

- Wisdom
- a combination of *nous* (the intellect) and *episteme* (knowledge).
- Allows one to know what qualities of the character are best

## Phronēsis (φρόνησις)

- Practical Judgment
- Required for judging things according to the aim of living well overall
- Allows one to apply a given quality of activity in any given context

# Virtue: The means between the extremes

- The Golden Mean – not an arithmetic mean but a relative mean – the proper application of a quality in a given context
- Virtue is defined as the mean between the vice of excess and the vice of deficiency – too much of a characteristic is as bad as too little
- Each of us must assess our abilities and have a good understanding of the situation or context of our moral decisions.

# Virtue: The means between the extremes

<u>Vice of Excess</u>	<u>Virtue</u>	<u>Vice of Deficiency</u>
• Foolhardiness	Courage	Cowardice
• Unrestrained giving	Liberality	Stinginess
• Drunkenness	Temperance	Abstinence
• Bragging	Truthfulness	Mock modesty
• Vanity	Pride	Humility



# Virtue: The means between the extremes

- Aristotle says that the virtuous person “sees the truth in each case, being as it were a standard and measure of them”.... Aristotle thinks of the good person as someone who is good at deliberation, and he describes deliberation as a process of rational inquiry. The intermediate point that the good person tries to find is “determined by *logos* (“reason,” “account”) and in the way that the person of practical reason would determine it”

(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

# Virtue: The means between the extremes

- Is Aristotle's doctrine of means the same as, "everything in moderation?" Can one be *too virtuous*?
- NO!
  - It is impossible to be too just – we can't be too lawful or fair
  - It is impossible to be too courageous; as courage is just the right balance between rashness and cowardice – courage is hitting the mark just right

# Virtue: Courage

- Aristotle argued the highest kind of courage is exhibited in actions done for their own sake – a kind of beauty
- One who is courageous may feel fear – as it is rational to do so, but they are able to balance that fear with a proper confidence



*“Woman Wrestled Fresh Ammo Clip From Tucson Shooter as He Tried to Reload: Patricia Maisch Hailed as One of the Heroes Who Stopped Tucson Slaughter”*



# Virtue: Courage

- *“For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy.”*
- Virtues must become habituated – over time through repeated activity we become courageous.



# Virtue: Courage



- There are other kinds of courage, such as that of the Trojan hero Hektor.
- Aristotle says this is largely a result of penalties for cowardice and honors for bravery.
- This is different from true courage because it is not based on voluntary actions aimed at being beautiful in their own right.
- But this is close to the best sort of courage as it is important for soldiers to fight *as if* they were brave.



# Virtue: Pride

- The rational assessment of self worth in the context of the *polis*.
- It is **not** the same as arrogance (*hubris*) or vanity
- Aristotle called it the “crowning virtue” as it is fundamental to the inculcation of all the other moral virtues.





# Some Objections to Aristotle's Virtue Theory:

- What if what we're good at is not something that is a good thing – problem is that the answer becomes circular – it is bad because it is not good.
- Suppose that the purpose of all things is a myth – suppose there is no higher purpose & everything is random and accidental? Then the only sense of purpose is that which individuals assign to things.
- Aristotle asks too much of his moral agent; few if any people can act rationally all the time.
- Why must one assume there is just one purpose for each thing or person – why can't there be many purposes & a multitude of functions?