

Aristotle's Ethics: How Being Good Can Make You Happy

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Aristotle was among the very greatest thinkers ever, some would say the greatest. He was born in Stagira, in Macedonia (now in northern Greece) in 384 BCE. His father was a doctor, and he always had an interest in medical matters. In 367 Aristotle travelled to Athens, where he spent the next twenty years as a member of Plato's Academy. Plato died in 347, and Aristotle left Athens for thirteen years, during some of which he tutored (not particularly successfully, by all accounts) Alexander the Great. In 334, he founded his own philosophical school, the Lyceum, where he remained until just before his death in 322.

The range of Aristotle's thought is phenomenal. He could plausibly be said to be the founder of many disciplines, making advances in our understanding of logic, mathematics, biology, physiology, astronomy, time, theology, literature, rhetoric, the nature of happiness, and much else. Dante called him 'the master of those who know', and when Aristotle's works were rediscovered in the west early in the second millennium it was absolutely standard, when one was puzzled about almost anything, just to take the relevant Aristotelian volume off the shelf and find the answer. If we had all of his works, an English translation of them would run to something like 7 or 8 million words. In fact, only one fifth remains, but we do have the most significant.

When people talk of 'Aristotle's *Ethics*', they usually have in mind the work known as the '*Nicomachean Ethics*' (or '*NE*'). This consists in ten 'books', with several chapters in each. Each book tends to concentrate on a particular theme, or small number of themes. Exactly when Aristotle composed the work is not certain, but there is a tradition that he was revising it shortly before he died. Aristotle did not write books 'for publication'. Rather, he gave lectures to students in the Lyceum, his notes for which were then deposited in the library for consultation. As the years went by he would return to these notes and revise them, which explains how certain anomalies have entered the text we now have (the two separate, and potentially conflicting, accounts of pleasure, for example, in books 7 and 10). Its influence on humanity has been immense, both within and outside the Christian tradition, and it continues to play an important part in contemporary thinking about ethics.

It is important to remember that Aristotle was not an isolated thinker. Socrates had died in Athens in 399, only twenty-two years before Aristotle himself arrived there. A central Socratic tenet was that moral virtue consists in knowledge, so that one who acts wrongly acts from ignorance. The Socratic conception of happiness linked it closely with virtue and knowledge. Plato continued this tradition, identifying moral virtue with an ordering of the soul in which reason governs the emotions and appetites to the advantage of the virtuous person. Aristotle can be seen as following the same agenda, asking the same sorts of ethical questions, and using the same concepts.

In this brief essay, I shall be able to do little more than touch upon a couple of the main topics of discussion in Aristotle's *Ethics*: happiness and virtue. I shall have to pass over much of interest in Aristotle's accounts of responsibility, justice, practical wisdom, moral weakness, friendship, and pleasure. But if I can persuade you to read and think about this wonderful book for yourselves, I shall consider my task to have been more than worthwhile.

Happiness

The starting point for Greek philosophical ethics was the question, 'What is the good life?'. That question was seen as close to, or even identical with, the question, 'What is the happy life?', and not so much, 'What is the right way to act?'. Though the Greek philosophers do have much to say about right action, their primary focus is neither on rightness nor on action. Rather, it is on happiness, and the happiness of a whole life.

Does that mean that, since he focuses on the happiness of the individual, Aristotle's ethics is egoistic? Not in the sense that he is advocating any kind of self-conscious, deliberate, self-seeking behaviour – looking out for number one. According to Aristotle, you should be concerned about particular other people *for their sake*, not for yours. But there is nothing in Aristotelian ethics inconsistent with the idea that, when the chips are down, your reasons for being concerned, for being a certain kind of person, for living a certain kind of life, or performing certain kinds of action, in the end rest only on the advancement of your own good. Strikingly, there is nowhere in Aristotle any recommendation of genuine self-sacrifice. Even the person who dies bravely on the battlefield 'assigns himself the greater good' – the good in question being 'nobility' (see book IX, chapter 8 (IX.8)).

There is a difference between the *concept* of happiness, and various *conceptions* of it. If you and I are talking about what human happiness consists in, we use the same concept. We attach the same sort of sense to the word 'happiness', and it is this that enables us to engage in discussion. But we may well have different conceptions, that is, views about what happiness actually consists in. In his account, Aristotle moves between spelling out the implications of the concept, which he believes put constraints on any plausible conception, and offering arguments for his own conception of happiness itself. In an important chapter, I.7, Aristotle tells us that happiness is 'complete'. Since the beginning of the book, he has been constructing hierarchies of activities and specialisms. Bridle-making, because it is merely instrumental to horsemanship, is less complete than horsemanship. But horsemanship is instrumental to the end of military science, and so subordinate in turn to it. In general, Aristotle says, instrumental goods are inferior to goods which are both good in themselves and instrumental to some other good. The most complete (or most final, or most perfect) good is that which is not instrumental to any other good, and is good in itself. Such is happiness.

The same follows from the notion of 'self-sufficiency'. This notion was popular in philosophical discussions of Aristotle's time. According to Aristotle's use of it here, something is self-sufficient 'which on its own makes life worthy of choice and lacking in

nothing'. Happiness does this. It is also unimprovable: it cannot be made more 'worthy of choice'. It is important to recognise here that Aristotle is not suggesting that a life can be happy only if it is itself unimprovable. That would be absurd, since any human life is always lacking something the addition of which would improve it. Rather, Aristotle's point is a *conceptual* constraint on any *conception* of happiness, that it not be improvable by the addition of some good which it has omitted. Compare here the argument of Plato's mentioned approvingly by Aristotle in X.2: if you claim that happiness consists in pleasure, but accept that a life containing pleasure *and* wisdom is better than a life containing just the pleasure, your conception has been shown to be insufficient. This interpretation of Aristotle on happiness has come to be known as 'inclusivist', for the obvious reason that it understands Aristotle to be claiming that any conception of happiness must include all goods. Against this, the 'dominant' interpretation has been offered, according to which Aristotle sees happiness as the primary or dominant good among several others. The force behind the dominant view lies mainly in the fact that in X.7, Aristotle appears to claim that happiness is to be identified with just one good, that of philosophical contemplation. Here, an inclusivist may suggest that Aristotle, having argued in I.7, that happiness consists in the exercise of the virtues, moves on in book X to consider which of these virtues is the most important.

At this point, we may wish to ask Aristotle which life one should go for, and whether it might be acceptable to commit vicious acts so as to further one's contemplation (to kill a rich aunt, for example, so as to spend one's inheritance on studying philosophy at Cambridge). Here we should remember Aristotle's frequent recommendation that we not seek greater precision in ethics than the subject-matter permits (see e.g. I.3), and his reminding us in X.8 that happiness can be found in exercising the moral virtues. There is nothing in Aristotle's text to suggest that he would advocate immorality in the pursuit of philosophy. Having outlined this conceptual constraint, Aristotle then moves to consider the *ergon* – the characteristic activity – of human beings, in the hope that some light may be shed on the nature of human happiness. What makes a flautist a flautist? His characteristic activity – playing the flute.

The good – the 'acting well' – of a flautist is, of course, to perform that characteristic activity well. Now consider a human being. Its characteristic activity is the exercise of reason: that is what, Aristotle thinks, makes human beings what they are. The good of a human being, then, will be exercising that capacity well. But what is it to do that? The good is acting well, and acting well is acting in accordance with the virtues. So exercising rationality well will consist in exercising rationality in acting virtuously.

This famous argument of Aristotle's – usually called the 'function argument' – has been subjected to much criticism. Do human beings have a single characteristic activity? Is rationality not anyway characteristic of other beings – the gods? Why assume that the good for a human being is the same as performing well the characteristic activity of human beings? (In other words, perhaps the (morally) good human life is not the life that is in fact best for me, in terms of my own well-being.) Why should exercising rationality well not be to use reason to seek my own pleasure, or honour, or power: is Aristotle not just smuggling his own conception of happiness into the argument?

Some of these objections probably rest on uncharitable interpretations of the argument. And at least some of them can be avoided if we see Aristotle's conception of happiness as resting not only on the function argument itself, but on his accounts of the individual virtues in books II-V. Of course, it is too swift of him to expect us just to accept that exercising rationality well is exercising it in accordance with the virtues. But the detailed portrait Aristotle paints of the virtuous life – and vicious lives – in the later books can be seen as providing the main support for his account of happiness.

Virtue and the Mean

It is important not to forget the conclusion of the *ergon* argument: human happiness consists in the exercise of the virtues. This has the radical implication that a vicious or immoral person literally has nothing to live for, and indeed might be best to commit suicide (since viciousness constitutes unhappiness). What, then, did Aristotle mean by 'virtue'?

Greek culture was one of excellence, in the sense that young men were encouraged to compete with one another in many spheres of life, including athletic, intellectual, and aesthetic activity. It is worth remembering that in Greek a horse that ran fast could be said to have a 'virtue' or excellence, in so far as it performed well its characteristic activity. Aristotle, however, is speaking not so much of physical excellences as virtues of character and of thought. Here, it is important that we have some understanding of the soul (I.13). The soul can be seen as bipartite, with a rational and a non-rational part. The rational part is the source of the intellectual virtues, the most important of which in connection with ethics is practical wisdom. Intellectual virtue is acquired primarily through teaching, while the virtues of character arise through habit. Someone might possess outstanding mathematical ability from a very young age, but developing virtue of character is more like learning a skill, such as carpentry – hence it is related to the non-rational part of the soul. Performing just actions, generous actions, and so on, will lead one to develop the corresponding character. And this character will lead to one's choosing virtuous actions for their own sake (II.4).

This provides a link between Aristotle's view and that of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724- 1804). According to Kant, in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, moral worth attaches to an action only to the extent that it is motivated by respect for the moral law. Some have taken objection to this claim, suggesting not only that moral worth can lie in other motivations, such as love, but that pure respect for duty is itself sometimes out of place. Aristotle here tells us that a virtuous person will choose virtuous actions for their own sake. Elsewhere, he says that he will choose them for the sake of 'the noble', and we can plausibly see choosing an action for its own sake as equivalent to choosing it for the sake of the noble. Again, as with Kant, there is no reference to love of others. But we should not forget Aristotle's account of friendship, which does allow for the concern one person may have for another.

Virtues, then, are dispositions engendered in us through practice or habituation. The notions of excess and deficiency, which play such an important part in Aristotle's account of the virtues, are first introduced in connection with the notion of habituation (II.2). In the case of healthy eating, for example, getting into the habit of eating too much or of eating too little will ruin one's health. Aristotle compares someone who is afraid of everything to someone who is afraid of nothing, and this kind of comparison has led some commentators to think he is offering us a quantitative account, according to which virtue is to be captured in, for example, being afraid of a middling number of things. But Aristotle's thinking is clearly prescriptive or normative: the brave person is the one who stands firm against terrifying situations, when he should, for the right reasons, and so on.

What, then, is Aristotle's 'doctrine of the mean'? In II.6, Aristotle says that we can feel fear, for example, either too much or too little, but that having fear at the right time, of the right things, and so on is 'the mean and best'. But how are we to understand feeling fear at the right time as in a mean? Again we have to remember the normative nature of the doctrine. No one should be fearless, since there are some things one should fear. Likewise, there are things one should not fear. There are, then, two directions in which we may go wrong: feeling fear at the right time is in between not feeling fear at the right time, and feeling fear at the wrong time.

This analysis helps us to see how the doctrine of the mean works with actions. Generosity, for example, involves giving away money at the right time, and to the right people, and one may fail to live up to its requirements both by failing to give away money when one should (which is stinginess) and giving away money when one should not (which is wastefulness). We can also see how one's character may consist partly in two 'opposite' vices, and Aristotle explicitly says (IV.1) that some of the characteristics of wastefulness (such as spending money when one should not) are commonly found with certain characteristics of stinginess (such as taking money from the wrong sources). Aristotle's doctrine is therefore not one of moderation. Sometimes, for example, one will be required to be very angry, and sometimes to give away only a tiny amount of money. It depends on the circumstances, and moderation has nothing in itself to be said for it. The doctrine of the mean works when we have a single morally neutral action or feeling that it is possible to do or feel at the right time, fail to do or feel at the right time, and do or feel at the wrong time. And it rests on an important insight: there are spheres of human action and feeling, and virtue consists in success within these spheres.

In recent years, there has been a revival of interest in the virtues, and in the ethics of virtue. The two main modern competitors to virtue ethics are utilitarianism and Kantianism. It is important to recognise that these three theories may largely converge in their practical conclusions. They may all, for instance, recommend that one be generous, or just. But the reasons that the theories offer differ greatly. According to utilitarianism, what makes actions right is their producing the largest amount of well-being overall. According to Kantianism, what makes actions right is their being in accordance with the law of reason. We might understand Aristotle, and a pure virtue ethics, as claiming that what makes actions right is their being virtuous.

There are differences between Aristotle and modern writers on the virtues. The virtue of kindness or beneficence, for example, is almost entirely absent from Aristotle's account, though he does allow that human beings do feel some common bonds with one another on the basis of their shared humanity (VIII.1). And the crown of the virtues for Aristotle is a distinctly unmodern and pre-Christian disposition, greatness of soul (IV.3), which consists in thinking oneself worthy of great things and being concerned almost entirely with honour. The great-souled person is unlikely to stir himself to help the vulnerable. Aristotle's discussions may be tabulated as follows:

Virtue	Sphere	Discussion in NE
Courage	Fear and confidence	III.6-9
Temperance	Bodily pleasure and pain	III.10-12
Generosity	Giving and retaining money	IV.1
Magnificence	Giving and retaining money on a large scale	IV.2
Magnanimity	Honour on a large scale	IV.3
[Nameless]	Honour on a small scale	IV.4
Even temper	Anger	IV.5
Friendliness	Social relations	IV.6
Truthfulness	Honesty about oneself	IV.7
Wit	Conversation	IV.8
Justice	Distribution	V
Friendship	Personal relations	VIII-IX

Aristotle also briefly discusses shame, which he says is not really a virtue, and appropriate indignation. Another difference between Aristotle and modern theorists of the virtues is his objective notion of happiness. The idea that there is some universal account of well-being, especially one grounded in human nature, is denied by most important modern writers who otherwise see themselves as returning to Aristotle. Likewise, none of them goes as far as to identify happiness with the exercise of the virtues.

It is also important to remember the context in which Aristotle composed his lectures. He was writing two and a half millennia ago, for noblemen in a city-state of tens of thousands. He believed such a city to be the best form of human society, and might well have thought it absurd even to attempt carrying across his conclusions about happiness in such a polity to what he would have seen as highly degenerate nation-states. It is not, in other words, a good idea to claim Aristotle as an ally in a modern debate the very assumptions of which he might have questioned. Rather, he should be read, carefully and sensitively, with an understanding of historical, social, and political context, as one of the best sources of insight into the human ethical condition available to us.

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Further Reading

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