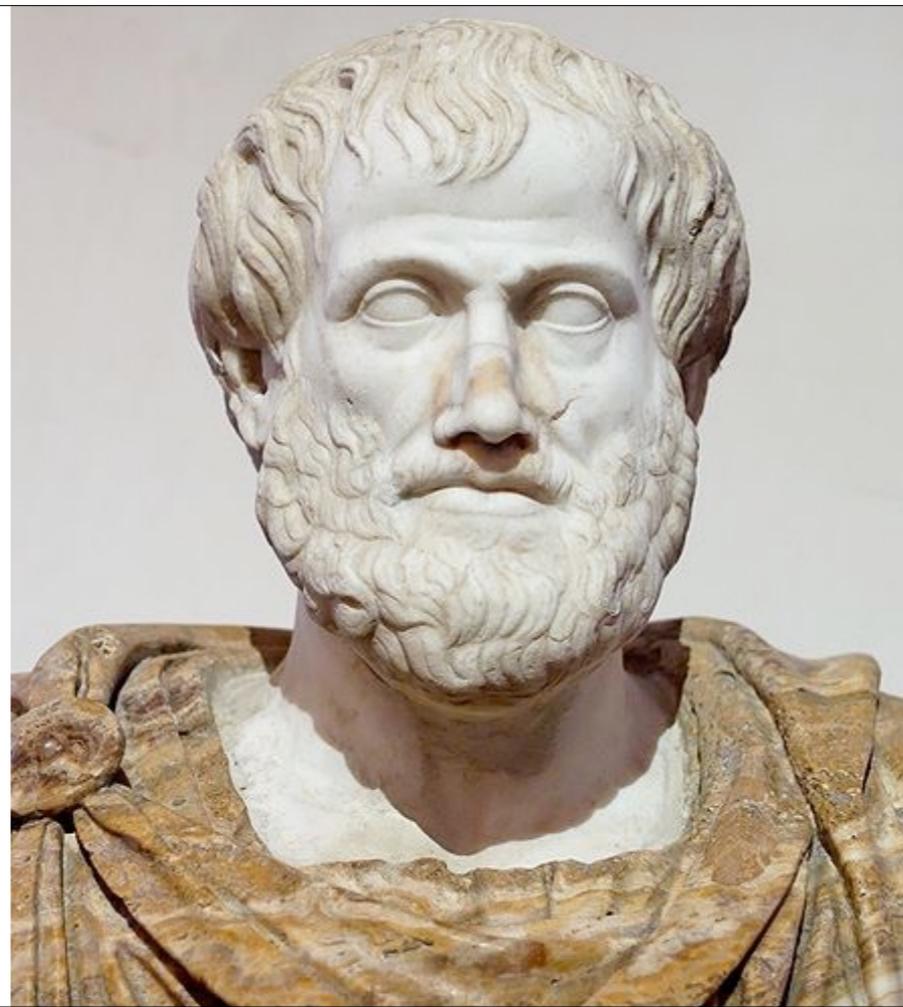


# Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

## Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics



Aristotle did not attempt to create a theoretical basis for the good such as would later be done by Kant and the Utilitarians.

Aristotle sought to determine what constituted the good life by observing the character of those generally considered to be leading good and bad lives.

Thus the key difference between Utilitarianism/Kant and Virtue ethics demonstrated with an example:

Suppose you are trying to teach a child that stealing is wrong.

Kant: Stealing is wrong because it violates our duty to respect the property rights of others

Utilitarian: Stealing is wrong because it does not result in the greatest good for the greatest number

Virtue ethics: Stealing is wrong because it corrupts our character.

# *Eudaimonia*

“Happiness is an activity of soul in accord with perfect virtue” (NE 1:13)

Aristotle concluded that the good life for man is centered on one characteristic – happiness.

The Greek word for this concept is Eudaimonia and it is perhaps better translated as “well being” or “flourishing”.

“Happiness is an activity of soul in accord with perfect virtue” (NE 1:13)

Thus happiness is not something static – happiness is not a destination that one arrives at, but rather a constant activity.

Aristotle’s ethics does not focus on discreet acts but rather on the overall character one creates.

Thus happiness is something that accompanies certain activities – a way of doing things.

# Arete

“We might achieve this by ascertaining the specific function of man. In the case of flute players, sculptors and craftsmen - indeed all who have some function or activity - “good” and “excellent” reside in their function. Now the same will be true of man, if he has a peculiar function to himself. Do builders and cobblers have functions and activities, but man not, by nature being idle? Or, just as the eye, hand, foot and every part of the body has a function, similarly, is one to attribute a function to man over and above these? In that case, what will it be?” (NE 1:7)

“The function of man is activity of soul in accordance with reason” (NE 1:7)

Aristotle maintains that all things have a function. A thing is good, and happiness is achieved, when it excels at its function. For example, an eye is good if it sees well, if a violinist is good, then she plays the violin well. “We might achieve this by ascertaining the specific function of man. In the case of flute players, sculptors and craftsmen – indeed all who have some function or activity – “good” and “excellent” reside in their function. Now the same will be true of man, if he has a peculiar function to himself. Do builders and cobblers have functions and activities, but man not, by nature being idle? Or, just as the eye, hand, foot and every part of the body has a function, similarly, is one to attribute a function to man over and above these? In that case, what will it be?” (NE 1:7)

“The function of man is activity of soul in accordance with reason” (NE 1:7)

Thus doing what is characteristic for humans to do, living in accord with reason, and doing it in the most excellent way, is what generates human happiness and thus result in the good life. It should be noted that happiness is not possible without excellence (arete) – so pursuit of excellence becomes the key to happiness.

# Virtue = a disposition to excellence

“Again, it is from the same causes and by the same means that every virtue is both produced and destroyed, and similarly every art; for it is from playing the lyre that both good and bad lyre-players are produced. And the corresponding statement is true of builders and of all the rest; men will be good or bad builders as a result of building well or badly. For if this were not so, there would have been no need of a teacher, but all men would have been born good or bad at their craft. This, then, is the case with the virtues also; by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly. The same is true of appetites and feelings of anger; some men become temperate and good tempered, others self-indulgent and irascible, by behaving in one way or the other in the appropriate circumstances. **Thus, in one word, states of character arise out of like activities. This is why the activities we exhibit must be of a certain kind; it is because the states of character correspond to the differences between these. It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference. ...**” (NE 2:1)

To possess a virtue is to have a disposition or habit that keeps impulse and emotion from leading one's actions astray – A virtue thus is a disposition or a habit toward excellence.

Thus a person who possesses the virtue of bravery has a disposition to act in a courageous manner – such courageousness occurs not as a result of some fierce internal struggle (as an SFA, for example) but rather occurs naturally because his character has been conditioned to act bravely.

Keep in mind, these virtues are not innate – they must be learned and practiced until they become habit

## Reason and the doctrine of the mean

Cowardice  
(too much fear)

Courage  
(the mean between  
the two)

Rashness  
(too little fear)

The good life is one of happiness and happiness is achieved through the cultivation of excellence – virtue

The key is Aristotle's "doctrine of the mean". Aristotle maintains that characteristics that lead to happiness are the mean between two vices.

The virtuous person is one who rationally discovers the mean between vices given our circumstances.  
For example, take courageousness.

This mean will not be the same for everyone. Each person must rationally discover the mean for themselves



Is this relativism?



This relativism is based on external circumstances – not the judgement of the individual – the individual, using reason, judges what is right in a particular circumstance – but this judgement does not determine what is right or wrong – the objective circumstances do. Thus the more excellent we are at applying reason – the more likely our actions will be right.

This mean will not be the same for everyone. Each person must rationally discover the mean for themselves  
Thus the mean is relative to us in our particular situation.

This relativism is based on external circumstances – not the judgement of the individual – the individual, using reason, judges what is right in a particular circumstance – but this judgement does not determine what is right or wrong – the objective circumstances do. Thus the more excellent we are at applying reason – the more likely our actions will be right.

For Aristotle, there are many good lives – the good life is dependent upon circumstance. In a way, Aristotle's idea is based on a non-relative principle (the mean), but the application of that principle is relative to circumstances.

Thus, finding the mean is a function of experience in combination with rationality.

For Aristotle "the good life" is a life of happiness, and happiness is achieved when people act moderately – when they strive for the mean between two extremes. The more excellent and practiced we are in the the use of reason, and the more habitual this practice becomes, the more frequently we will be able to achieve the mean and the happier we will be.

# Outline of Aristotle's theory



Actions that lead  
to a  
virtuous character (that create  
excellent habits)

The good life

Happiness - *Eudaimonia*

Virtue

=

A habit of  
excellence

Happiness is achieved through  
excellence at one's function -*Arete*

Man's function = Reason



Actions that lead  
us away from  
virtue (that create non  
excellent habits) are  
bad

Reason enables us to identify the mean,  
and thus avoid the extremes of vice, in  
all situations.

We excel at reason through practice of  
reason. Practice makes excellence  
habitual.

## The habit of happiness

Aristotle's virtues can be described as a propensity to think, desire, feel and act in an integrated manner.

Aristotle argues that the ethical ideal is not the person who is able to force themselves to do what is right despite their desires, but rather the person who cultivates a character in which "want" and "ought" become one in the same - where desire is to do what is right.