

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: Learn to Live Well



What is the good life, and how can we live it?

Image: Raphael's *The School of Athens*



Warm-Up: What is Your Good Life Goal?

Watch this: “Big Questions: What Makes a Life Good (Lecture 1)” (PhiLife Team)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YpjFZKiStoA>



Quick Poll! What is your ultimate, end goal for your life?

What’s the one thing where, if you look back over your life, you can say, “If I have this, then I’ve lived a good life.”

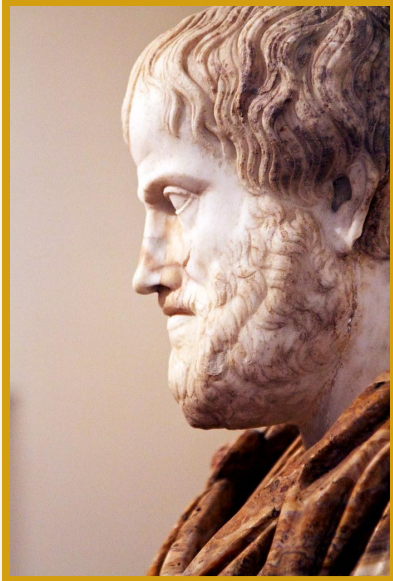
Make your voice heard! To cast your vote and see how others across the world answered, go to this link: <https://forms.gle/14vxiLyvLH1Tzb3C9>



Introduction

Who was Aristotle?

Aristotle was an ancient Greek philosopher who lived 384-322 BC. He learned philosophy from Plato (who learned it from Socrates). He was the tutor of Alexander the Great. Aristotle was interested in every branch of philosophy and science.



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What text are these selections from?

The *Nicomachean Ethics* is a ten chapter book collecting fragments from Aristotle's lessons at the Lyceum. It is a set of philosophical arguments and recommendations for students who wish to achieve happiness. It was composed around 350 BC. You read the entire text [here](#). A PDF of these selections are [here](#).

Honestly, how hard is it to be happy?

In this text, Aristotle distinguishes pleasure (the feeling of happiness) from human flourishing or "eudaimonia" (the state of having fulfilled your potential and living well). Aristotle thought pleasure can be fleeting, and even individuals whose lives were going quite badly might have pleasure. (Think of hedonists like Bluto from *Animal House*). Only flourishing is pursued for its own sake — it is the goal for all of our lives.



Key Concepts

- Final vs. Instrumental Ends
- Happiness
- Virtue
- Natural vs. Habitual Properties
- Moral Particularism



The Ultimate Goal of Our Lives (I.7)


The following is one of the most famous passages in all of Western philosophy, an excerpt from Book 1, Chapter 7 of *Nicomachean Ethics*. In it, Aristotle asks why humans do the things that we do, and his answer

is that ultimately we do everything we do because we think it will lead to our happiness.

Let us again return to the good we are seeking, and ask what it can be. It seems different in different actions and arts; it is different in medicine, in strategy, and in the other arts likewise. What then is the good of each? Surely that for whose sake everything else is done. In medicine this is health, in strategy victory, in architecture a house, in any other sphere something else, and in every action and pursuit the end; for it is for the sake of this that all men do whatever else they do. Therefore, if there is an end for all that we do, this will be the good achievable by action, and if there are more than one, these will be the goods achievable by action.

So the argument has by a different course reached the same point; but we must try to state this even more clearly. Since there are evidently more than one end, and we choose some of these for the sake of something else, clearly not all ends are final ends; but the chief good is evidently something final.


Therefore, if there is only one final end, this will be what we are seeking, and if there are more than one, the most final of these will be what we are seeking. Now we call that which is in itself worthy of pursuit more final than that which is worthy of pursuit for the sake of something else, and that which is never desirable for the sake of something else more final than the things that are desirable both in themselves and for the sake of that other thing, and therefore we call final without qualification that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else.

 **Final vs. Instrumental Ends**

An instrumental end or goal is one you pursue in order to get closer to another end or goal. For instance, you might pursue studying for the SATs because you are pursuing the more important goal of attending college.

Aristotle thinks a final end or goal is one for which we cannot reasonably wonder anymore why we are pursuing it. We are pursuing it for its own sake.

Presumably all instrumental ends have a final end at the end of the chain:




Take SATs Go to college Get a great job Make money Be Happy ???

If nothing comes next, this is the final end.



Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for self and never for the sake of something else, but honor, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that by means of them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself...

 We all intuitively know what happiness means, or at least what it feels like. In the next section, though, Aristotle will look more closely at the term, and claim that it may not be what you think it is...



The Function Argument

Defining Humanity

Aristotle concludes Book I.7 famously by arguing that pursuing a certain kind of happiness is the defining feature of man — what separates us from every other kind of thing. Let's carefully take apart this argument, since there is a lot of philosophy in here.

We will start with the text:

Presumably, however, to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account of what it is still desired. This might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function of man.

For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or an artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function. Have the carpenter, then, and the tanner certain functions or activities, and has man none? Is he born without a function? Or as eye, hand, foot, and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these? What then can this be?

Life seems to be common even to plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but it also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle; of this, one part has such a principle in the sense of being obedient to one, the other in the sense of possessing one and exercising thought. And, as 'life of the rational element' also has two meanings, we must state that life in the sense of activity is what we mean; for this seems to be the more proper sense of the term. Now if the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle, and if we say 'so-and-so-and 'a good so-and-so' have a function which is the same in kind, e.g. a lyre, and a good lyre-player, and so without qualification in all cases, eminence in respect of goodness being added to the name of the function (for the function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre, and that of a good lyre-player is to do so well): if this is the case, and we state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete.

But we must add 'in a complete life.' 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.

The Function Argument Broken Down

(1) The goodness of anything is determined by whether it fulfills its function well or poorly.



For example: A good knife is one that cuts well. A poor knife can't cut anything. A good lyre player plays beautiful music. A bad lyre player sounds... awful. Functions determine standards for goodness or badness of a thing.

(2) The function also defines what that thing is.

For example: If you cannot cut anything, you are not a knife. If you cannot grow and metabolize nutrients, you are not a plant. The nature of something gives a necessary condition for being that thing.

(3) Man is defined apart from plants, animals, and mere things by the fact that we can act rationally.

For example: We share biological processes of life with plants and animals. And animals have the ability to perceive — simply having a mind does not make us special. What defines humans is we can reason about goals (sometimes quite distant ones) and pursue them.

(4) A person is good to the extent that he is good at acting rationally.

This premise follows from (1) and (3)

(5) The final, complete goal is happiness (Eudaimonia).

Aristotle is assuming this, based on the argument in the previous section.

(6) So happiness consists in doing a good job of acting rationally (aka being virtuous).

More on this in the next section...

(7) Whether a person has pursued happiness well can only be determined in the context of a complete life.

For example: You might seem to be happy if you have gotten to college. But if it turns out you use your education to do something evil, then in fact this "achievement" hasn't moved you closer to happiness.

(C) The goal of a human life is to rationally pursue happiness over the course of a life.

Questions about the Function Argument

When philosophers ask questions or provide counterexamples, we try to target specific premises in an argument, rather than the argument as a whole. Here are some questions you might have about the function argument:

(1) The goodness of anything is determined by whether it fulfills its function well or poorly.

QUESTION: Where would these standards for good functioning come from? God? Some user manual that comes along with plants and animals?

(2) The function also defines what that thing is.

QUESTION: Can absolutely everything be defined and classified in this way? Are there any functionless things?

(3) Man is defined apart from plants, animals and mere things by the fact that we can act rationally.

QUESTION: What is rationality? What about dolphins, intelligent dogs, birds who can count? Is this what makes man special?

(4) A person is good to the extent that he is good at acting rationally.

This premise follows from (1) and (3)

(5) The final, complete goal is happiness (Eudaimonia).

(6) So happiness consists in doing a good job of acting rationally (aka being virtuous).

(7) Whether a person has pursued happiness well can only be determined in the context of a complete life.

QUESTION: Does this entail we cannot know if we are happy (in Aristotle's sense) while we are still living? And what about lives that are lived well, but end on a bad note?

(C) The goal of a human life is to rationally pursue happiness over the course of a life.



What is a Virtue?

In the next few excerpts, Aristotle will explore the nature of the virtues, those things he said were essential to happiness in the previous section. So far, what we know is this:

Virtues = stable personality traits that reliably dispose a person to act well.

Vices = stable personality traits that reliably dispose a person to act badly.

The virtues are excellences of human character, and possessing them all is, for Aristotle, necessary to live a good life.



"William Blake. 1757-1827. The Good and Evil Angels. vers 1800. Londres Tate Britain. Ink, watercolor on paper." by jean louis mazieres is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0



The Habituation Argument

The Power of Habit

In this excerpt (Book II, Chapter 1), Aristotle makes the following revolutionary (and still controversial) claim: Virtues and vices are properties of persons (character traits) that can be acquired.

Virtue, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit... From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature.



Natural vs. Habitual Properties

Aristotle contrasts natural properties and those acquired by habit. The key idea here is that properties things have by nature cannot be changed, but those that we acquire by habit can be changed (for instance, by training ourselves in a different way). Virtues, Aristotle says, are habitual, not natural.

Example: I naturally have the property of being alive. I could acquire (through training and practice) the property of being able to speak Japanese.

For instance the stone, which by nature moves downwards cannot be habituated to move upwards, not even if one tries to train it by throwing it up ten thousand times; nor can fire be habituated to move downwards, nor can anything else that by nature behaves in one way be trained to behave in another.

Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.

The Habituation Argument Broken Down

For Aristotle, we are not just naturally morally good or bad. We have some control (via learning, habituation, the communities and groups we choose to be a part of) over whether we live morally good or morally bad lives.

He supports this claim by arguing that:

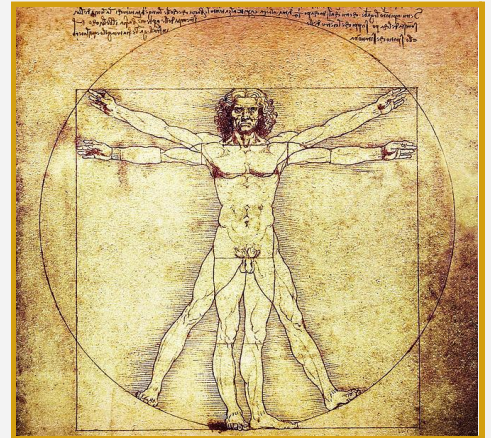
(1) No natural properties can be changed by habituation.

For example: You can't teach a stone to fall upwards.

(2) Virtues can be changed by habituation.

For example: You can teach a soldier to be courageous, or a child to be moderate in their consumption of candy.

(C) Therefore, virtues cannot be natural properties.



Virtue Requires Practicing Good Action

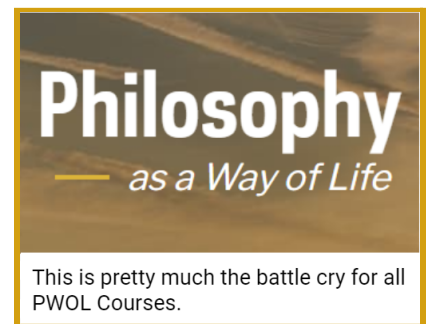
In Book II, Chapter 2, Aristotle argues that the virtues are learned and practiced through action, not just sitting around and thinking about them.

Since, then, the present inquiry does not aim at theoretical knowledge like the others

(for we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order that we may become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use),

we must examine the nature of actions, namely how we ought to do them; for these determine also the nature of the states of character that are produced, as we have said.

Now, that we must act according to the right rule is a common principle and must be assumed — it will be discussed later, i.e. both what the right rule is, and how it is related to the other virtues. But



this must be agreed upon beforehand, that the whole account of matters of conduct must be stated in outline only and not precisely, as we said at the very beginning that the accounts we demand must be



Moral Particularism

Aristotle famously claims that there are no general moral theories that will always guide you in figuring out what's right and wrong. For Aristotle, determining what's right or good (what a virtuous person would do) always depends on the particulars of the case. Hence, learning to live well is more like learning to diagnose diseases, and less like learning to solve equations.

in accordance with the subject-matter; matters concerned with conduct and questions of what is good for us have no fixity, any more than matters of health. The general account being of this nature, the account of particular cases is yet more lacking in exactness; for they do not fall under any art or precept but the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion, as happens also in the art of medicine or of navigation...

Again, of all the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity (this is plain in the case of the senses; for it was not by often seeing or often hearing that we got these senses, but on the contrary we had them before we used them, and did not come to have them by using them); but the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.

This is confirmed by what happens in states; for legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them, and this is the wish of every legislator, and those who do not affect it miss their mark, and it is in this that a good constitution differs from a bad one...

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.



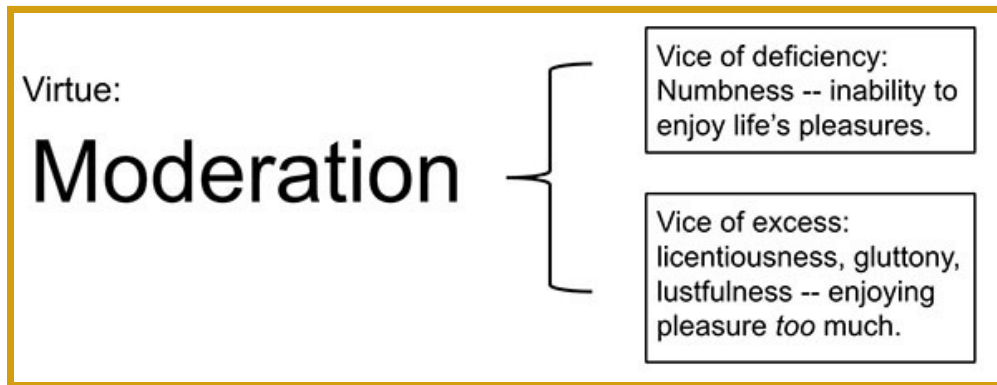
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Virtue as the Mean Between Two Extremes

In this excerpt, Aristotle describes in more detail how to identify the virtues by comparing them to their related vices of defect and excess. Let's take a look:

Let us consider this, that it is the nature of such things [as the virtues] to be destroyed by defect and excess, as we see in the case of strength and of health (for to gain light on things imperceptible we must use the evidence of sensible things); both excessive and defective exercise destroys the strength, and similarly drink or food which is above or below a certain amount destroys the health, while that which is proportionate both produces and increases and preserves it. So too is it, then, in the case of temperance and courage and the other virtues. For the man who flies from and fears everything and does not stand his ground against anything becomes a coward, and the man who fears nothing at all but goes to meet every danger becomes rash; and similarly the man who indulges in every pleasure and abstains from none becomes self-indulgent, while the man who shuns every pleasure, as boors do, becomes in a way insensible; temperance and courage, then, are destroyed by excess and defect, and preserved by the mean.



Pleasure and the Virtues

Finally, Aristotle considers the role of pleasure in a virtuous life. He argues that a good education ought to lead us to take pleasure in virtuous activities, because humans are highly motivated to seek whatever brings them pleasure.

Moral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of the pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of the pain that we abstain from noble ones. Hence we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth... so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought; for this is the right education. ...

it has grown up with us all from our infancy; this is why it is difficult to rub off this passion, engrained as it is in our life. And we measure even our actions, some of us more and others less, by the rule of pleasure and pain. For this reason, then, our whole inquiry must be about these; for to feel delight and pain rightly or wrongly has no small effect on our actions.

Pleasure has been a part of the upbringing of us all from infancy; it is difficult to remove this experience, since our life has been so ingrained with it. We also take pleasure and pain as the rule of our actions, some of us to a greater degree and some to a lesser. It is on account of this, then, that one's entire concern necessarily pertains to pleasure and pain, for taking delight and feeling pain make no small contribution to our actions being well or badly done.

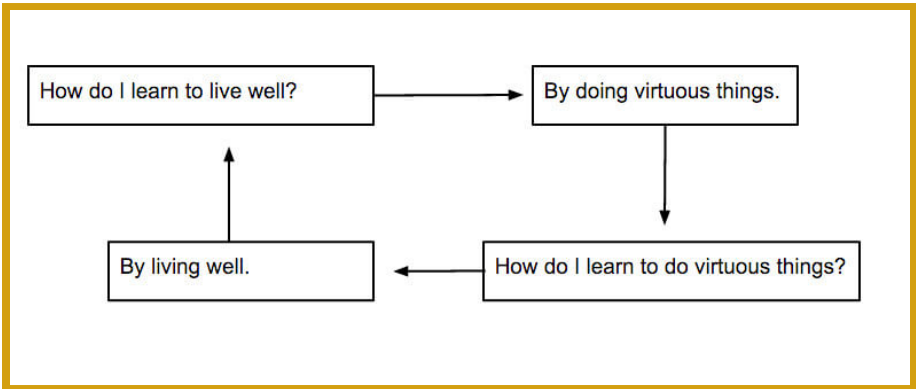


Objection: How Can We Ever Become Virtuous?

Here (Book II, Chapter 4), Aristotle considers whether his account of how we acquire virtues is circular.

The question might be asked; what we mean by saying that we must become just by doing just acts, and temperate by doing temperate acts; for if men do just and temperate acts, they are already just and temperate, exactly as, if they do what is in accordance with the laws of grammar and of music, they are grammarians and musicians...

Actions, then, are called just and temperate when they are such as the just or the temperate man would do; but it is not the man who does these that is just and temperate, but the man who also does them as just and temperate men do them. It is well said, then, that it is by doing just acts that the just man is produced, and by doing temperate acts the temperate man; without doing these no one would have even a prospect of becoming good.



He answers this worry by reiterating that actual practice must come before offering a theory of how to live well.

But most people do not do [the practice of learning to act well], but take refuge in theory and think they are being philosophers and will become good in this way, behaving somewhat like patients who listen attentively to their doctors, but do none of the things they are ordered to do. As the latter will not be made well in body by such a course of treatment, the former will not be made well in soul by such a course of philosophy.



Free-Write Question: Consider how this passage relates to our course. How does Aristotle think moral philosophy ought to be taught? How is this similar or different from how you are learning it in this course?

Contribute to the global conversation! Write your answer on this link:
<https://forms.gle/KgYoxjqgEgD5mWQ37>



Summary

For Aristotle, philosophy is a deeply practical enterprise. He's a **particularist** — he does not think you can live well by reading books or studying a general theory. Instead, you need practice solving real problems and dealing with complexity. He thinks you learn virtue by developing **the right kinds of habits** and by having a good community around to support you. To master the virtues, you need lots of practice and feedback. And he thinks that **living well is more than just finding pleasure** in your life — it is developing your talents, including growing in virtues like courage, moderation, and generosity.

Acknowledgements

This digital essay was prepared by Paul Blaschko and Meghan Sullivan from the [University of Notre Dame](#).

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