

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

Even if both J.S. Mill and Aristotle pointed to happiness as the human being's ultimate end, happiness, as so construed by Aristotle, veers away from its common conception. While this is usually associated with bodily pleasures, the way to grasp it in the context of Aristotle's theory is to understand it in terms of how individuals can actualize their highest potential or best perform the function that is distinct to them (White 1992). This goes to show that understanding Aristotle's notion of happiness is tied to understanding how human beings can attain virtue.

Virtue, which is a key concept in Aristotle's Ethics, is equivalent to the Greek term "arete," which means "excellences of various types" (MacKinnon 2004). The virtue of a thing is dependent on its proper function as this is a disposition to perform one's proper function effectively (Jones, et al. 1969). As illustrated by Aristotle in the case of a lyre-player, he said that his function is "to play the lyre;" however, if he is to be a good lyre-player, he must "play it well" (Aristotle, Book I.7, Ross, trans. 2009,12). Since what sets humans apart from other beings is rationality, the function proper to humans must be in accord with the exercise of their rational nature. Thus, to be a good human being means to be good at carrying out these activities. As the only being endowed with rationality, one must endeavor to live a life of reason. This is how one could actualize her highest potential and pursue her excellence, as a human being, and ultimately, live a happy life.

But how does one live a virtuous life and become a virtuous person? Aristotle distinguished between two kinds of virtue: intellectual virtue and moral virtue. *Intellectual virtue* is virtue of thought that enables humans to think rationally, while *moral virtue* is virtue of the character that enables one to temper emotions and desires. The former grows mainly from teaching while the latter is developed from habit (Francis & Mabaquiao 2020).

Aristotle's comprehensive account of the virtue of character centers on "moderation" as moral virtue is a disposition to choose the mean (Donaldson 1986). The viewpoint is captured in the following lines:

Virtue [of character], then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate. Hence in respect of what it is, i.e. the definition which states its essence, virtue is a mean, with regard to what is best and right an extreme (Aristotle, Book II.6, Ross, trans. 2009, 31).

The above highlights the principle that “excess or deficiency ruins a good [result] while the mean preserves it” (Aristotle, Terence, trans. 2013, 43). Excess and deficiency are viewed as “vices,” while the mean is regarded as “virtue.” Reason directs a person to choose the “mean” and avoid the “extremes.” Human beings are challenged to allow reason to always temper their desires and passions so they can act in moderation and avoid vices. This forms the core of Aristotle’s Doctrine of the Mean.

Below are some examples of particular virtues examined by Aristotle using his doctrine:

DEFICIENCY (Vice)	MEAN (Virtue)	EXCESS (Vice)
Cowardice	Courage	Rashness
Insensibility	Temperance	Self-indulgence
Stinginess	Generosity	Extravagance
Indecisiveness	Self-control	Impulsiveness
Secrecy	Honesty	Loquacity
Unirascibility	Good temper	Irascibility
Mock Modesty	Truthfulness	Boastfulness

(Examples taken from Aristotle, Books II.7-II.9, Ross, trans. 2009, 32-35)

As virtue of character requires time to develop, one must make it a habit to act rightly, through the repeated exercise of the act, until this becomes second nature to her (Reyes 1969.) It is through habit that virtue is either produced or destroyed:

[It] is from playing the lyre that both good and bad lyre-players are produced...This then is the case with 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 by being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly (Aristotle, Book II.2, Ross, trans., 24).

Consequently, a virtuous person becomes virtuous by developing the habit of performing virtuous acts. Also, it is important for the moral agent to satisfy the following whenever she is doing virtuous acts to qualify as genuinely virtuous in character: “(1) the agent must act in full consciousness of what he is doing; (2) he must will his action and pursue it for its own sake; and (3) the act must proceed from a fixed and unchangeable disposition” (de Castro, et. al. 2003, 64).

Some important characteristics of moral virtue are summed up in the following lines:

Moral virtue is a rational measured activity following the rule of the “just middle,” motivated by the right intention and proceeding from a permanent disposition acquired through repeated exercise of the act (Reyes 1969, 39).

Meanwhile, Aristotle also underscored the importance of intellectual virtue, where intelligence, wisdom, and understanding are included. He asserted that it is both important for human beings to act and to know. The former aligns to moral excellence while the latter is under the domain of intellectual excellence. A virtuous person is expected to make good decisions, and as decisions require understanding and thought, excellent decisions presume excellent reason (Aristotle, Terence, trans. 2013). A person aspiring for a good life must endeavor to attain both the virtues of character and thought (Van Wyk 1990). This is the path to a life of virtue, to a life of happiness. A virtuous life is a happy life.

As can be gleaned from the discussion, Aristotle’s Ethics did not focus on actions but rather on the character of the moral agent. While theories that focus on actions are criticized for not giving attention to the character, this theory can be criticized in the opposite way (Rachels 2003). Another criticism is on its claim about an individual’s distinctive function. The theory only recognizes one but the critics claim that this is problematic as one creates and chooses her function or purpose; and hence, it can vary from person to person (Evangelista & Mabaquiao 2020).