

## WHAT IS THE VIRTUOUS LIFE? ARISTOTLEAN “VIRTUE ETHICS”

Ethics: Course Notes | Brendan Shea, PhD ([Brendan.Shea@rctc.edu](mailto:Brendan.Shea@rctc.edu))

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, **Aristotle** (the “Father” of logic, biology and lots of other stuff) defends a **virtue-based** theory of ethics. Like his teachers Plato and Socrates, Aristotle argues that it is generally in a person’s *own best interest* to be ethical. However, his theory is many ways much more nuanced and complex than are their accounts. Aristotle’s account of ethics was also one of the major influences on later “Western” ethical theories, including Roman (“Pagan”), Jewish, Christian, and Islamic ethics. Some of the ethical precepts that we now take to be “common sense” are originally explained and defended by Aristotle in this book.

### EUDAMONIA AND THE VIRTUES

*“Suppose, then, that there is some end of the things we pursue in our actions which we wish for because of itself, and because of which we wish for the other things; and (b) we do not choose everything because of something else, since (c) if we do, it will go on without limit, making desire empty and futile; then clearly (d) this end will be the good, i.e., the best good. Then surely knowledge of this good is also of great importance for the conduct of our lives, and if, like archers, we have a target to aim at, we are more likely to hit the right mark.” (Aristotle, *Nich. Ethics* 1094a18-22)*

Aristotle begins by noting that every human activity or investigation has some *goal* or *end* that it aims to accomplish. For example, the end of medicine is “health”, the goal of shipbuilding is a “vessel”, and the goal of business is “wealth.” Other examples: the goal of most games and sports is to “defeat your opponent while following the rules”, while the goal of weight-lifting might be “to increase your strength.” Aristotle then notes that, while we value all of these goals, we value them in two different ways:

- We might value the goal or end only **instrumentally**, or insofar as it allows us to accomplish some other goal. For example, Aristotle thinks that most people value money only instrumentally.
- We might value the goal or end purely **intrinsically**, or for its own sake. Aristotle argues that we value **eudaimonia** (“true happiness” or “a successful life”) intrinsically. He argues that it would be nonsense to ask “Why do we value eudaimonia?” since there is nothing “better” or “more basic” that could explain why we value eudaimonia.
- Aristotle thinks that, while everyone *wants* eudaimonia, people sometimes get confused on what it actually is, and what it would *really* mean to be happy. He thinks some people think that happiness is simply *physical pleasure*, and so they devote their lives to this (which often doesn’t end well for them). Somewhat better than this are those people who think that happiness has to do with *pride* or *social status* (“How will I look to other people?”) but Aristotle thinks this is still a mistake. Only those who aim at *wisdom* will be happy.

**What is eudaimonia? And how do I get it?** Aristotle sees ethics as a “practical” discipline that aims to help us achieve eudaimonia:

**Step 1: Determine the “function” of a human.** Aristotle argues shows us that each class of living being has its own “function” or “purpose.” Plants, for example, merely seek nutrition and growth; while animals *also* feel pleasure and pain, which causes them to seek/avoid various things. Finally, humans are *rational* animals that, in addition to food and pleasure, want to live in communities of other reasonable beings.

**Step 2: So, a human’s goal (achieving eudaimonia) is to be a *good* rational animal.** From this, Aristotle concludes that achieving *eudaimonia* is a matter of perfecting our natures as rational, social beings. This will require developing both **intellectual virtues** (math, music, philosophy) and **moral virtues** (ethics). Where the former can be learned from books and discussion, the latter require *practice*.

### WHAT IS A MORAL VIRTUE? HOW DO VIRTUES RELATE TO ETHICS?

*“[V]irtue of character is concerned with pleasures and pains. For it is pleasure that causes us to do base actions, and pain that causes us to abstain from fine ones. Hence we need to have had the appropriate upbringing—right from early youth, as Plato says—to make us find enjoyment or pain in the right things; for this is the correct education.” (Aristotle, *Nich. Eth.* 11049-13)*

Aristotle thinks that “functioning well” (and thus achieving eudaimonia) requires cultivating the **virtues**. So what are virtues?

**Virtues are “habits” of acting well. They are NOT “natural instincts.”** Aristotle argues that we can become more virtuous by behaving virtuously; conversely, we can become less virtuous by behaving less virtuously. Because of this, it is clear that your parents, society, and religion will strongly influence what moral virtues you have as an adult. For Aristotle, this explains the close link between the moral virtues of a particular person and the *ethike* (roughly, “custom”) of the culture in which they live.

**Virtues require more than “doing the right thing.” They require you *practice* it. You must also do it for the right *reason* and with the right *emotion*.** For Aristotle, you don’t immediately become virtuous just by “thinking about it” (i.e., he doesn’t think reading this handout is going to help you too much). Instead, you become virtuous only when you have “internalized” the principle of acting correctly. For example, Aristotle thinks that a virtuous person will eat an appropriate amount of food, since eating too much or too little will be unhealthy. However, the virtuous person (unlike, say, the person who has just started a diet this week) will have internalized this as a *habit*—he or she will intuitively “know” the correct amount to eat and won’t have to make too much of an effort to stay within this range. Moreover, if asked, “Why do you behave in this way?” the virtuous person will be able to account correctly for it in terms of rational life goals (i.e., “Because I want to be healthy” and not “Because I want to look like an underwear model”).

**By the time the “crisis” hits, it is already too late.** Aristotle thinks that most of the real “ethical choice” is done *before* we encounter crises. So, for example, Aristotle would emphasize that while one cannot *immediately* become a “healthy eater” by beginning a diet, but that one can *eventually* change one’s habits if one simply continues to eat healthily for long enough. Aristotle repeatedly emphasizes the idea that, by the time a “crisis” arrives (e.g., you are sitting in front of an entire pie, and are trying to decide whether to eat it), it is many cases “too late” to do anything about it (e.g., you may be “unable to resist” eating it). The same thing goes for moral virtues (the inveterate liar “can’t help” lying when everything is on the line; the coward is simply “overcome by fear”). The role of rationality in developing virtues comes in the many small moments *before* we find ourselves faced with stressful, make-or-break decisions (when emotions will take over).

## VIRTUES AS THE MEDIAN BETWEEN TWO EXTREMES

After all this build-up, you might be wondering, “so just what is a virtue, anyway?” Aristotle has a ready answer for you: Every virtue is a mean (or median) between two opposed vices (**The Doctrine of the Mean**). This simple theory is complicated a bit by the following facts:

1. **Every virtue is a median between two extreme vices. However, some vices are NOT simply extreme versions of virtues.** For example, moderation (in eating) is a virtue, whereas as gluttony and self-starvation are vices. The same thing holds for things like sexual desire and desire for safety. These involve different attitudes and behaviors toward food, which is something humans need to live. However, while cruelty is a vice, there is no corresponding virtue—there is simply no *reason* for human to intentionally inflict suffering on one another (in this sense, cruelty is very unlike the vices of gluttony, lust, or fear which correspond to “good” emotions taken too far).
2. **Not every virtue is equally distant from both vices.** Aristotle often refers to the virtues as a sort of “peak”, which emphasizes the fact that there may be a further/sharper descent down *one* side of the line than along the others. For example, Aristotle thinks that moderation in eating is (for most of us, though certainly everyone) is closer to eating too little than it is too eating too much, and that bravery is closer to foolhardiness than it is to cowardice (since most of us are more inclined to run from danger than we are to simply ignore it altogether). Aristotle says that, in general, we ought to (a) try to figure out which vice we are more prone to and (b) aim to err on a bit the side of the *other* vice, in cases where we are forced to do so. This will, in the end, result in a more virtuous action.
3. **A person can be *more* or *less* virtuous, and for various reasons.** A truly **vicious** person doesn’t care about virtue at all, and instead cultivates vice. So, for example, a truly vicious person might *enjoy* torture, and aim to inflict just enough pain so that (a) the victim suffers horribly but (b) the victim does not pass out. Aristotle has very little to say to this person, though he suggests that this sort of life would be a terrible, unhappy one for most humans. Aristotle thinks that the vast majority of us are NOT vicious, but are simply **weak-willed** people who “want” to be virtuous, but who get “swept away” by various desires.

## WHAT ARE THE ARISTOTELIAN VIRTUES? SOME EXAMPLES

In general, Aristotle seems to take the proud Greek warrior (such as Achilles or Hector) as his model of the “virtuous man.” As we’ll discover later, modern virtue ethicists tend to choose slightly different lists of virtues. Some of his virtues are as follows:

Vice of Deficiency	Virtuous Mean	Vice of Excess
Cowardice	Courage	Rashness

<b>Insensibility (completely cold and unfeeling)</b>	Temperance (with regards to bodily pleasures like food and sex)	Intemperance (give in to desires immediately)
<b>Selfishness</b>	Generosity (with regards to giving money to others)	Prodigality
<b>Pettiness</b>	Munificence (with regards to spending money on public works, charity, etc.)	Vulgarity
<b>Inappropriate self-doubt</b>	Appropriate self-confidence	Vanity
<b>Lack of ambition</b>	Goal-driven	Over-ambition
<b>Overly sensitive</b>	Gentleness	Anger
<b>Surliness</b>	Friendliness	Obsequiousness or flattery
<b>Overly ironic</b>	Sincerity	Boastfulness
<b>Boorishness (cruel, inappropriate humor)</b>	Wittiness	Buffoonery (clown-like behavior)
<b>Shamelessness</b>	Modesty	Bashfulness

## VIRTUE ETHICS: OTHER VERSIONS

**Religious Ethics.** Religions such as Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, etc. have, to a varying degree, emphasized the idea that believers ought to *emulate* certain saints, heroes, or deities, and to practice certain virtues. So, for example, Catholicism offers a list of seven virtues (Humility, Kindness, Abstinence, Chastity, Patience, Generosity, and Diligence), while Buddhism offers a similar list of “perfections” (Generosity, Proper Conduct, Renunciation, Wisdom, Equanimity, etc.). Finally, Confucianism offers a list of five (Benevolence, Righteousness, Propriety, Wisdom, Fidelity).

**Care Ethics.** Some contemporary virtue ethicists (primarily feminist ethicists) have argued that the “good mother” is a better ethical role model. In particular, they think that the virtue of maternal **care** (or maternal “love”) is something like the *most important virtue*. (Biologically speaking, it’s pretty plausible that maternal care was the first sort of love/care to evolve, which would probably have interested a biologist like Aristotle.) One advantage of this view is that it seems to do a good job explaining why we have such extensive moral obligations to the people *close* to us (parent-child, close friends, physician-patient). It also places an emphasis on emotions such as *empathy* for others, which are lacking from Aristotle’s list.

One disadvantage is that it doesn’t say much about the different *types* of caring that might be appropriate for different relationships. For example, most care ethicists emphasize that you *should* care about strangers (and that you should somehow act on this), but they don’t really say much about how this sort of caring should/does differ from the care for the people you are close to. In this sense, Aristotle’s long list of virtues might do a somewhat better job.

## CRITICISMS OF VIRTUE ETHICS

For traditional deontologists and utilitarians, the major problem with virtue concerns the list of virtues chosen (How are we supposed to figure out *which virtues* are the right ones to follow, given the fact that every culture, religion, and thinker provides different ones?) and its vagueness (How on earth are we supposed to figure out what Jesus, Buddha, Confucius, Achilles, the perfect mother, etc. would actually do? History provides plenty of evidence that people don’t agree on things like this.) For these reasons, they have defended their simpler, more “rule-based” approaches to ethics.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What does Aristotle mean by *eudaimonia*? In general, how does he think that we achieve eudaimonia?
2. Give an example of how a particular virtue (good character trait) that might be thought of as a “mean” between two extreme vices. Which vice do you think this is “closer to”? (That is, what sort of vice are people *more likely* to fall into)?
3. How do you think our *current* ideas about what a *virtuous person* is compare to Aristotle? So, for example, Aristotle seemed to think of “virtuous” people as being people like Achilles (a great warrior) or Socrates (the poor philosopher who cared only for the truth). Who plays these roles in our society? What are the similarities? The differences?
4. What do you think of virtue ethics as an “alternative” to traditional moral theories? Can it replace them altogether? Should it simply be ignored? Is it somehow possible to somehow make the theories work “together”?