

**ARISTOTLE'S ETHICAL THEORY**  
**VIRTUE ETHICS**  
**DR. DAVE YOUNT, MESA COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

**I. ARISTOTLE (384 – 322 BCE)**

A. **ARISTOTLE'S ETHICAL THEORY:** Aristotle's view of the sciences drives his ethical theory. His theory is known more popularly today as virtue ethics.

1. **The Hierarchy of Sciences:** Every art, science, action, and purpose aims at some good. This is a teleological view, one that uses ends or goals to describe our actions. There are different ends for different actions. For instance, the end of medicine is health, of economics wealth, and so on. Also, there is bridle-making for horses, horsemanship for military action and strategy, etc. So these ends can be imagined to be in a massive hierarchy.
2. **There is an "Absolutely Final" End of all the Sciences.** Aristotle says that if there is one end (the "absolutely final" end) to which all these sub-ends aim, and beyond which we do not use it to aim to anything else, it would be of great importance in human life.
3. **The "Absolutely Final" End is Happiness.** This one end that all people and their actions is aiming at is happiness (where happiness is thriving, flourishing, or living well, and *not* merely a pleasant or giddy feeling or a smiley person), but happiness means different things to different people. Candidates for happiness include health, wealth, pleasure, virtue, and honor. Plato says that there is a Good Itself (beyond all other goods) that is the cause of these goods (health, wealth, pleasure, virtue, honor), but that does not exist, according to Aristotle. Base people think that happiness is pleasure. "Better people" think happiness is honor, but honor requires and depends on other people. So virtue is the end of political science (that is, politics is the science of human goodness); but a virtuous man is not happy when he's sleeping or experiencing misfortunes. Aristotle states that the life of money-making is a constraint – wealth is just a means to something else and can be a burden instead of a great thing. But it does play a role in our gaining happiness: we need money so we can help our friends and people in need.
4. **The Function of Humans:** To define happiness, we need to discover what the peculiar function of humans, which is: **Activity of soul in accordance with reason or not apart from reason in a complete life.** The virtue of humans will be such a moral state as makes humans good and able to perform their proper function well.
5. **Happiness requires external goods,** since you cannot do noble deeds with no outside means (that is, external goods include friends, wealth, political power, good birth, wholesome children, personal beauty). Ugly people, people with bad children, death of loved ones

can cause unhappiness. Animals and children cannot share in the activity of happiness, since they lack (practical) reason.

6. **Intellectual Virtue v. Moral Virtue:** Virtue is part of the definition of happiness, so let's look at what virtue is further. Virtue is partly intellectual, and partly moral. Intellectual virtue is fostered by teaching and requires experience and time. Moral virtue is the outcome of habit and is basically doing good actions v. deliberating about them. A stone cannot be habituated to anything, but a human has the capacity from nature to habitualize good action. We practice doing brave actions, and we thereby become brave. Keep in mind that the object of Aristotle's inquiry is not purely theoretical; the main object is to become virtuous or good in action. Happiness is an activity for Aristotle.
7. **The Golden Mean:** Aristotle's rule for ethical action:
  - a. **Theory of excess, deficiency, and moderation:** Extremes or excesses in both directions (i.e., excess and deficiency of each virtue) are both fatal and morally wrong (i.e., they both result in unhappiness). Too much or too little exercise is not good for one's health. Too much bravery is rashness, too little bravery is cowardice. Other examples include: Ascetic / Temperate / Licentious; Stingy / Magnanimous / Spendthrift. Therefore, the excess and defect are vicious or wrong, and the mean is virtuous, the virtue, or right.
  - b. **The mean is equidistant from each extreme.** The mean can be different for each individual: The right amount may vary with each individual; EX: How much money to donate in order to be generous. Bill Gates needs to give A LOT of money, since he has a lot to give. I don't have to give as much, since I have much less. But I need to give something; I cannot just declare that I don't feel like giving, and that is my "mean," if I have money.
  - c. **The virtuous person aims at the mean** (and virtue is concerned with emotions and actions), but there are many ways in which to go wrong. This feature helps explain why the mean is Golden: It is rare to be able to hit the mean in every action, there are not that many people able to do this, and hitting the mean allows the agent to achieve happiness (and there are not a lot of happy people out there). Not every action or emotion has a mean.
  - d. **What is virtue then?** Virtue is a state of deliberate moral purpose consisting in a mean that is relative to us, the mean being determined by reason, or as a prudent person would determine it.
  - e. **A good example that sums up the Golden Mean:** E.g., One needs to give money to the right person, to give the right

amount of money, at the right time, for the right cause, and in the right way. (Again, this is not easy to do, and this is why goodness/happiness is rare, praiseworthy and noble, on Aristotle's view.)

## B. EVALUATION OF ARISTOTLE'S VIEW:

### IN FAVOR:

1. **Accounts for complexities in ethics:** Aristotle's theory tries to account for the complexities of ethics – good action in every situation seems to vary.
2. **Flexible:** Aristotle's theory also seems to allow for us to behave differently in different situations, and that is a plus.
3. **“Character Matters!”** Virtue Ethics holds that there is more to life than simply following moral rules (you might want to reread this after you read what Kant and Mill's ethical theories are), and that it is a matter of your attitude as well.

### AGAINST:

1. **Fails to provide effective guidance:** It is far from obvious what the virtuous thing to do in every case is. For example, is abortion or capital punishment morally permissible according to this theory, or not?