

2 Aristotle

1. Aristotle: What Is Eudaimonia?

Term and basic idea

- Greek term: *eudaimonia*
- Often translated as “happiness,” but better as **flourishing or living well**.
- Crucial point: it is **not a feeling or mental state** (like pleasure, satisfaction, or mood). It is an **overall condition of your life** going well in a distinctively human way.

Key features of eudaimonia

1. Final end (ultimate goal)

- Every action aims at some good (health, money, honor, etc.).
- Some goods are sought for the sake of something else (money □ buy things).
- **Eudaimonia is what we choose only for its own sake**, never merely as a means.
- Therefore it is the **highest human good** (the *summum bonum*).

2. Complete and self-sufficient

- “Complete”: nothing further is needed to make it better as a kind of life.
- “Self-sufficient”: having it is enough to make a life **choiceworthy and lacking nothing essential** (while still including relationships, community, etc.).
- We do not add other goods to “improve” it in kind; they are already included in a flourishing life.

3. An activity, not a state

- Eudaimonia = a **way of living and acting** over a **complete life**, not a momentary condition.
- You can have the capacity for virtue and still not be flourishing if you are inactive or live badly.

4. Objective, not just subjective

- People often equate happiness with pleasure, honor, or wealth.
- Aristotle argues that these can be:
 - Dependent on others (honor).
 - Merely instrumental (wealth).
 - “Animal-like” if taken as the whole of life (pleasure).
- Eudaimonia is about **actually living in a way that fulfills your nature as a human being**.

2. Aristotle's Argument: Eudaimonia Is Living in Accordance with Reason

This is often called the “**function argument**”.

Step 1: Things have characteristic functions

- For Aristotle, many things have a **function** (an characteristic activity or role):
 - Eye: to see well
 - Knife: to cut well
 - Harpist: to play the harp well
- The **good** for each kind of thing = **performing its function excellently**:
 - A good knife cuts well.
 - A good harpist plays the harp well.

Step 2: Humans also have a characteristic function

- Body parts have functions, so **it's plausible that a human being as a whole has a function**.
- To find the human function, we must look for what is:
 - **Distinctively human** (not shared with plants and animals in the same way).
- Consider candidate “lives”:
 1. **Life of nutrition and growth** – shared with plants not distinctively human.
 2. **Life of perception and sensation** – shared with animals still not distinctively human.
 3. What remains: a **life involving reason**.
- Human beings are distinguished by our capacity to **reason**:
 - We **have reason** and can **act in light of it**.
 - Therefore, the **human function** = **activity of the soul in accordance with reason** (or at least not without reason).

Step 3: The human good = performing this function well

- For any thing:
 - Function of X = characteristic activity.
 - Good of X = performing that function **well**, in accordance with the relevant **virtue (excellence)**.
- Apply to humans:
 - Human function: **rational activity of the soul**.
 - Doing this well requires **excellence (virtue)** of the rational part.
 - So the **human good** (eudaimonia) is:
 - * **Activity of the soul in accordance with virtue (excellence), involving reason, over a complete life.**

Step 4: Two aspects of “living in accordance with reason”

From the lecture outline:

1. **Excelling in the activity of reasoning**
 - Thinking clearly, judging well, understanding what truly matters.

- Developing intellectual virtues (wisdom, understanding, good judgment).
- 2. Performing the actions that reason recommends**
- Actually **acting** on rational insight.
 - Living virtuously: making choices and forming habits that embody what reason says is best.

So:

Eudaimonia for a human being is living a whole life where your reasoning is excellent and your actions follow that good reasoning.

3. Excellence (Virtue) as the Mean Between Deficiency and Excess

Arete: excellence or virtue

- Greek term: *arete* = **excellence, virtue, being outstanding at fulfilling your function.**
- Human virtues are ways of **being excellent in rational activity and in desires/actions guided by reason.**

The “doctrine of the mean”

- Many virtues are **means between two opposite vices**:
 - One vice of **deficiency** (too little).
 - One vice of **excess** (too much).
- Virtue is the **right balance**, not too much and not too little.

Examples (classic ones to know):

- 1. Courage**
 - Deficiency: **cowardice** (too much fear, too little confidence).
 - Excess: **rashness/recklessness** (too little fear, too much confidence).
 - Virtue (courage): **fearing and facing dangers in the right way**, at the right time, for the right reasons.
- 2. Temperance (moderation with pleasures, e.g., food, drink, sex)**
 - Deficiency: **insensibility** (too little enjoyment, refusal of appropriate pleasures).
 - Excess: **self-indulgence** (overindulgence, lack of self-control).
 - Virtue: **taking bodily pleasures in the right amount, at the right time, in the right way.**
- 3. Generosity**
 - Deficiency: **stinginess/meanness** (too little giving, too attached to money).
 - Excess: **wastefulness** (giving or spending too much, without proper reason).
 - Virtue: **giving the right amounts of money or resources to the right people, for good reasons.**

Important clarifications

- **Not the arithmetic middle**
 - It is not simply “halfway” between two extremes.
 - What counts as the **mean is relative to the person and the situation:**

- * The right amount of food is different for a child vs. an athlete.
 - * The right fear in battle depends on actual danger, responsibilities, etc.
 - **Requires good judgment**
 - Finding the mean is not mechanical.
 - It requires **practical wisdom**: the ability to see what is appropriate here and now.
 - This is why Aristotle says “you have to have good judgment” to hit the mean.
 - **Applies primarily to character traits, not everything**
 - Many **moral virtues of character** fit the mean model.
 - Some things (e.g., injustice, adultery) are wrong **in any amount**; they don’t have a virtuous “mean” in the same way.
 - But the mean structure is a central idea: **virtue as balanced, reason-guided responsiveness**, avoiding both deficiency and excess.
-

4. The Importance of Practice in Developing Excellence (Virtue)

Virtue is acquired, not innate

- We are **not born virtuous or vicious**.
- We are born with the **capacity** to develop virtues.
- Whether we become excellent (virtuous) or not depends on **habituation** (forming habits through repeated actions).

How we develop virtue: practice, practice, practice

1. **By doing virtuous actions**
 - Just as you become a good lyre-player by **playing the lyre repeatedly**, you become just, courageous, or temperate by **doing just, courageous, or temperate actions repeatedly**.
 - We **shape our character** by our actions.
 - Repeated actions create **stable dispositions** (character traits).
2. **Role of a good upbringing**
 - Children need **good training and guidance** so that:
 - They are **habituated** to take pleasure in good actions and feel pain at bad ones.
 - They learn to follow reason instead of mere feelings or impulses.
 - Without good early habits, it is much harder to become virtuous later.
3. **Emulate exemplars**
 - Look at **excellent people** (moral exemplars) and imitate them.
 - Observing how they **feel, think, and act** in specific situations helps you learn:
 - What the **virtuous mean** looks like in practice.
 - How a good person balances fear and confidence, giving and saving, etc.
4. **Practical vs. theoretical knowledge**
 - Knowing the theory of virtue is **not enough**.
 - Aristotle stresses that **the aim is action, not just knowledge**.
 - Someone who **knows** what virtue is but does not **act** accordingly does not benefit much from their knowledge (like someone who knows about health but lives unhealthily).
 - Virtue must become **habitual**, so that:

- Right actions feel natural.
- Emotions and desires align with what reason judges to be good.

Why practice is central for eudaimonia

- Remember: **eudaimonia = activity of the soul in accordance with reason and virtue.**
- To live that way steadily over a whole life, you need:
 - **Stable virtues of character** (courage, temperance, justice...).
 - **Developed intellectual virtues** (good judgment, practical wisdom).
- These can only be developed by **ongoing practice**:
 - Repeated rational choices.
 - Constant adjustment toward the mean.
 - Learning from exemplars and experience.

So for Aristotle, **flourishing (eudaimonia)** is not a quick emotional achievement; it is the result of a **lifetime of practicing and strengthening rational, virtuous activity**.