

2 Aristotle

Aristotle on Happiness (Eudaimonia) and Virtue

Focused exam notes

1. What Is Eudaimonia?

Key term:

- Eudaimonia is usually translated as “happiness,” but better as “flourishing” or “living well.”

Not a mere feeling or mood

- Not just pleasure, contentment, or a positive mental state.
- It is about the overall quality of a life, not momentary experiences.
- Someone might feel happy yet live a shallow, vicious, or wasted life – Aristotle would not call that eudaimonia.

The highest human good

Eudaimonia is:

1. Final (ultimate) end
 - We choose everything else (money, honor, pleasure, health, etc.) for the sake of something further.
 - Eudaimonia is never chosen for the sake of something else; it is desired for its own sake.
2. Complete (nothing further needed to improve it as an end)
 - If you could add another good (e.g., a bit more money) and that made it a better end, then the original wasn't fully complete.
 - Eudaimonia is already the most complete form of living well.
3. Self-sufficient
 - Enough by itself to make life worth living and lacking in nothing essential.
 - Includes not just the individual, but a life within human relationships (family, friends, community), since humans are social/political animals.

Where is eudaimonia located?

- Goods can be: - External (wealth, status), - Bodily (health, strength), - Of the soul (virtues, activities of thinking and choosing). - Aristotle says the most important goods are of the soul.

- So eudaimonia is primarily a way of living and acting — excellent activity of the soul, not external possession or bodily condition.

Summary:

Eudaimonia = a complete, self-sufficient life of doing well, chiefly consisting in excellent rational activity, not in mere pleasure, wealth, or honor.

2. Why Eudaimonia for Humans Is Living in Accordance with Reason

(a) The Function Argument

Aristotle's strategy:

- To find the human good, ask: What is the characteristic function (ergon) of a human being?
- For anything with a function, its good consists in performing that function well.

Examples: - The good of a flute-player = playing the flute well.

- The good of a knife = cutting well.

- In general: Good X = excellent performance of X's distinctive function.

Apply this to humans:

1. Everything that has a function has a good tied to that function.
 - Eyes → seeing well.
 - A harpist → playing well.
2. Does a human as such have a function?
 - Not just whatever a particular person happens to do (e.g., "shoe-making"), but what humans as a kind are for.
3. What activities do humans share with other beings?
 - Nutrition and growth → shared with plants.
 - Perception and basic desire → shared with animals.
 - These cannot be the distinctively human function.
4. What is distinctively human?
 - The capacity for reason:
 - Using reason to think, deliberate, and understand.
 - Using reason to guide actions and desires.
5. Conclusion about our function
 - The human function = activity of the soul involving reason:
 - Using reason itself.
 - Obeying or following reason in action.

(b) From Function to Eudaimonia

Once we know the function, we ask: what is it to do it well?

1. The function of a human being:
 - Rational activity of the soul (thinking and acting in line with reason).

2. The function of a good human being:
 - Rational activity performed well, i.e., in accordance with virtue (excellence).
3. Therefore, the human good (eudaimonia):
 - Activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, especially the best and most complete virtue.
 - Over a complete life (not just one good day or moment).

Living in accordance with reason – two aspects (from the lectures):

1. Excelling in reasoning itself
 - Thinking clearly, judging well, understanding what is truly good.
 - Having intellectual virtues (e.g., wisdom, practical judgment).
2. Performing the actions reason recommends
 - Actually acting in line with good reasoning: acting justly, courageously, temperately, etc.
 - So it is not enough to know what is right; one must do it consistently.

Summarizing Aristotle's argument:

1. The highest good is the final, complete, self-sufficient end → eudaimonia.
 2. The human function is rational activity of the soul.
 3. Doing one's function well = activity in accordance with virtue.
 4. So eudaimonia for a human = a life of excellent rational activity, thinking and acting in accordance with reason and virtue.
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3. Excellence (Virtue) as the Mean Between Deficiency and Excess

Key term:

- Greek: arete – usually translated as virtue or excellence.

(a) Character virtue as a state

- Moral (character) virtues are stable states of character that dispose us to:
 - Feel appropriately,
 - Choose appropriately,
 - Act appropriately.

(b) The doctrine of the mean

Aristotle's central idea:

- Moral virtue is a mean between two vices: - One of excess, - One of deficiency.

Formally: - Virtue is a mean "relative to us", determined by reason and by what the person of practical wisdom would decide.

Important clarifications:

1. Not the simple arithmetic middle
 - The mean is not just splitting the difference numerically.
 - It depends on the person and situation (e.g., the right amount of food differs by body type, activity level).
2. Mean in terms of emotions and actions
 - Virtue = feeling and acting:
 - At the right time,
 - About the right things,
 - Toward the right people,
 - For the right reasons,
 - In the right way.
3. The extremes are vices
 - Each virtue lies between two bad extremes.

(c) Standard examples

1. Courage
 - Concerns: fear and confidence in the face of danger.
 - Deficiency (too much fear, too little confidence): cowardice.
 - Excess (too little fear, too much confidence): rashness.
 - Mean: courage – fearing the right things, in the right way, and standing firm when reason says one should.
2. Temperance (moderation)
 - Concerns: bodily pleasures (especially food, drink, sex).
 - Deficiency: insensibility (not enjoying what a human reasonably should).
 - Excess: self-indulgence (overvaluing and overpursuing such pleasures).
 - Mean: temperance – enjoying such pleasures in appropriate ways and amounts.
3. Generosity (liberality)
 - Concerns: giving and taking money.
 - Deficiency: stinginess/meanness.
 - Excess: wastefulness/prodigality.
 - Mean: generosity – giving the right amounts to the right people at the right times, in line

with good judgment.

Why the mean view matters for eudaimonia:

- Since eudaimonia is excellent rational activity, and virtue = the state that enables us to choose and act well,
 - Cultivating the virtues (these means) is essential to living in accordance with reason and thus to flourishing.
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4. The Importance of Practice in Developing Excellence (Virtue)

(a) Virtue is acquired, not innate

- Aristotle thinks we are not born virtuous or vicious.
- We are born with the capacity to develop virtues or vices.
- Whether we become virtuous depends heavily on habituation (practice).

(b) Habituation: we become what we repeatedly do

Core idea: - We become just by doing just actions;
- We become temperate by doing temperate actions;
- We become courageous by doing courageous actions.

Analogy from the lectures: - Like learning to play the lyre/instrument: - You don't become a good musician by merely learning theory.

- You become a good musician by repeated practice of the right kind of playing, under guidance.

Similarly for virtue: - Knowledge alone is not enough.

- One must perform virtuous actions often enough that they shape one's character.

(c) Role of upbringing and social environment

- Good upbringing is crucial:
 - Families and laws should train us from youth to take pleasure in good actions and feel pain at bad ones.
 - This early training sets our character on a particular path.
- The right environment:
 - Being around people and institutions that encourage and reward virtuous actions makes it easier to habituate virtue.

(d) Emulating exemplars

- One way to learn what the virtuous mean looks like in practice:
 - Observe and imitate moral exemplars, people of practical wisdom and good character.

- Ask: What would a truly brave, just, or generous person do here?

(e) Why practice is necessary for eudaimonia

1. Living in accordance with reason requires stable character, not occasional good choices.
 2. Stable character only develops through long-term habituation.
 3. Without virtues, our feelings and desires will pull us away from what reason recommends.
 4. So practice (habituation) is essential if we are to:
 - Consistently act in accordance with reason,
 - Possess the virtues,
 - And thereby achieve eudaimonia.
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Very Short Exam-Style Summary

- Eudaimonia: The highest human good; a complete, self-sufficient life of flourishing, consisting in excellent rational activity rather than in mere pleasure, wealth, or honor.
- Why eudaimonia = living according to reason:
 - Human function = rational activity (distinctive capacity).
 - Good human life = performing this function excellently, i.e., activity of the soul in accordance with virtue over a complete life.
- Virtue as mean:
 - Moral virtue is a state of character that aims at the mean between excess and deficiency (relative to us), as determined by reason.
 - Examples: courage between rashness and cowardice; temperance between self-indulgence and insensibility; generosity between wastefulness and stinginess.
- Practice in developing virtue:
 - Virtue is formed by habituation, like a skill.
 - We become virtuous by repeatedly doing virtuous actions, guided by good upbringing and exemplars, until we possess stable character that allows us to live consistently in accordance with reason and thus to flourish.