

2 Aristotle

Aristotle on Happiness (Eudaimonia) and Virtue

Exam-focused notes

1. What is Eudaimonia?

1.1 Basic Idea

- Eudaimonia is usually translated as happiness or flourishing.
- For Aristotle, it is:
 - The highest human good – the ultimate aim of all our actions.
 - Complete – chosen entirely for its own sake, never as a means to something else.
 - Self-sufficient – if you have it, your life is lacking in nothing important.

1.2 Not a Feeling or Passing Mood

- Eudaimonia is not:
 - A temporary feeling of pleasure,
 - A mood like joy or contentment.
- It is an overall condition of living well over a whole life – a life that is going as a human life ought to go.

1.3 Why Not Pleasure, Wealth, or Honor?

Aristotle considers popular views and rejects them as the highest good:

- Pleasure:
 - Resembles the life of “grazing animals.”
 - Can be base, bodily, and not uniquely human.
 - Can be had by a thoroughly bad person.
- Wealth:
 - Clearly a means to other things, not an end in itself.
 - Therefore cannot be the ultimate end.
- Honor:
 - Depends on other people’s opinions, not on your actual state.
 - People seek honor as a sign that they are already good; so virtue seems more fundamental than honor.

Conclusion:

Eudaimonia is not any one of these things. It is a life of excellent human activity – a life in which your distinctively human capacities are fulfilled in the best way.

2. Why Eudaimonia for a Person is Living in Accordance with Reason

2.1 The Function Argument (Core of Aristotle's Reasoning)

Aristotle's key move:

The good for a thing = excellent performance of its characteristic function.

1. Every function-thing has a "good":

- For a flute-player, good = playing the flute well.
- For a doctor, good = healing well.
- For an eye, good = seeing well.
- In general: the good of X is doing its proper function excellently.

2. Human beings must also have a characteristic function:

- Like the eye or the flute-player, a human is a kind of thing with a role or function.
- The function of the human cannot just be:
 - Life/nutrition/growth – plants have that too.
 - Perception/sensation – animals share that as well.
- So the distinctively human function must involve what is special to humans.

3. What is distinctively human? Reason.

- Humans uniquely:
 - Have the capacity for rational thought (theoretical and practical),
 - Can organize their lives by reasons rather than by mere impulse.
- Therefore the human function is: > Activity of the soul that involves reason or requires reason.

4. The human good = performing the human function excellently:

- Just as the good harpist plays well, the good human:
 - Engages in rational activity,
 - Does so in accordance with virtue (excellence).
- So the human good (eudaimonia) is: > Activity of the soul in accordance with the best and most complete virtue, over a complete life.

2.2 Two Aspects of "Living in Accordance with Reason"

The lecture outline helpfully breaks this into two parts:

1. Excelling in the activity of reasoning itself

- Using reason well:
 - Thinking clearly,
 - Judging well about what is true (theoretical reasoning),
 - Judging well about what to do (practical reasoning).
- This includes intellectual excellences like:
 - Wisdom, understanding, practical wisdom (phronesis).

2. Performing the actions that reason recommends

- Not enough to think well; you must act on good reasons.
- Your actions and feelings should be:
 - In the right way,
 - At the right time,
 - For the right reasons,
 - As good reason dictates.

Result:

For a person, eudaimonia = living a life of rational activity in accordance with virtue – both: - exercising reason excellently, and
- shaping one's whole pattern of actions according to sound reason.

This is the greatest good (the sumnum bonum) for a human being.

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

3.1 What is Arete (Excellence/Virtue)?

- Arete means excellence or virtue – being good at being the kind of thing you are.
- For humans, virtues are:
 - Stable character traits (e.g., courage, generosity),
 - That dispose us to feel and act in the right way,
 - In line with reason.

3.2 The Doctrine of the Mean

- Moral virtue is a mean between two vices:
 - One of excess,
 - One of deficiency.
- This “mean” is:
 - Relative to us – depends on the situation and person,
 - Not a simple arithmetic middle (“exactly halfway”),
 - Determined by good judgment (practical wisdom).

Structure:

- For each virtue, we can identify:
 - A relevant sphere (e.g., danger, money, honor, pleasure, anger),
 - The deficiency (too little),
 - The excess (too much),
 - The virtue (right amount in the right way).

Examples (very important to be able to produce):

- Courage (sphere: fear and confidence about danger):
 - Deficiency: cowardice (too much fear, too little confidence),
 - Excess: rashness (too little fear, too much confidence),

- Virtue: courage (fears the right things, at the right times, to the right degree, for good reasons).
- Generosity (sphere: giving and taking money):
 - Deficiency: stinginess/meanness (gives too little),
 - Excess: wastefulness (gives too much, carelessly),
 - Virtue: generosity (gives the right amounts, to the right people, in the right way).
- Temperance (sphere: bodily pleasures, especially food, drink, sex):
 - Deficiency: insensibility (too little responsiveness even to appropriate pleasures),
 - Excess: self-indulgence (too much pursuit of pleasure),
 - Virtue: temperance (moderate enjoyment under the guidance of reason).

3.3 Role of Reason in the Mean

- The virtuous person:
 - Hits the mean as reason would determine it,
 - Given the circumstances.
- That is why we need:
 - Practical wisdom (phronesis) to see where the mean lies,
 - Not just a formula like “always choose the middle option.”

Connection to eudaimonia:

Since eudaimonia is activity in accordance with virtue, and virtue = rationally finding and hitting the mean, living well is consistently choosing the reasonable mean in actions and feelings.

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

4.1 Virtue is Not Inborn or Merely Theoretical

- We are not born virtuous or vicious.
- We are born with the capacity to become virtuous.
- Moral virtue is not:
 - Simply a matter of knowing rules or theories,
 - Automatically produced by intellectual instruction alone.

Virtue is a settled character state formed by habit.

4.2 Habituation: How We Become Virtuous

Key idea:

> We become just by doing just actions; we become brave by doing brave actions; we become temperate by doing temperate actions.

- Habituation = forming habits through repeated actions:
 - Repeatedly acting in the right way,
 - Under the guidance of reason (or of those who have it),
 - Gradually shapes our character and emotional responses.

Analogy used in the lecture outline:

- Like learning to play the lyre (a musical instrument):
 - You don't become a good musician by reading about music,
 - You must practice, practice, practice the right moves.
- Similarly:
 - You don't become courageous merely by admiring courage,
 - You must face fears in the right way repeatedly.

4.3 Role of Upbringing and Exemplars

- Good upbringing is crucial:
 - Children must be trained to:
 - * Take pleasure in good actions,
 - * Feel pain or shame at bad actions.
 - This early training supplies the starting points from which ethical reasoning later develops.
- Emulating exemplars:
 - To know how the virtuous person acts, we:
 - * Look at wise and virtuous exemplars,
 - * Use their lives as models.
 - Imitating those who already have good character helps us:
 - * Learn what the “mean” looks like in real situations,
 - * Form similar habits ourselves.

4.4 Why Practice is Essential for Eudaimonia

- Eudaimonia = excellent rational activity over a life.
- But:
 - Without practiced virtues, our emotions and desires resist reason.
 - We may know what is right but fail to do it.
- Practice:
 - Aligns our feelings, desires, and actions with reason,
 - Makes acting virtuously easier, more stable, and more pleasant.

Therefore:

To reach eudaimonia, it is not enough to ask, “What is my purpose?” or to see that it involves reason. You must train yourself, through repeated practice and guided upbringing, to live in accordance with reason, consistently hitting the mean that constitutes virtue.

Quick Summary for Exam Recall

- Eudaimonia: objective flourishing; the highest human good; not mere feeling; complete and self-sufficient.
- Why “in accordance with reason”?
 - Human function = rational activity (distinctively human).
 - Human good = excellent performance of that function → activity of soul in accordance with virtue (rational excellence) over a complete life.
- Virtue as mean:

- Virtue = excellence in character.
 - Each moral virtue is a mean between excess and deficiency, relative to us, found by right reason.
 - Examples: courage (between cowardice and rashness), generosity (between stinginess and wastefulness), temperance (between insensibility and self-indulgence).
- Practice and habituation:
 - We acquire virtues by repeatedly performing virtuous actions.
 - Good upbringing and role models are vital.
 - Practice aligns feelings and actions with reason, enabling a life of eudaimonia.