Defining the best life for a human being and how to obtain it is an object of concern of Aristotelian, Epicurean, and Stoic ethical philosophy. Each of these schools of thought sees the happiness of a human being as a pragmatic ordeal from which understanding can provide practical benefit to our lives. Exactly what this happiness is and how best to achieve it are the points of disagreement; each school gives a unique account of what the best good for a human being is and how it relates to happiness and our behavior.

Aristotle begins his *Nicomachean Ethics* by establishing the best good as that at which all of our actions aim. By understanding this highest good, Aristotle insists, we will be able to better conduct our lives. Aristotle claims that the best good is living well and happiness (*eudaimonia*), on the grounds that it is the only unconditionally complete good such that “we always choose it, and also choose it because of itself, never because of something else” (1096a39-1097b1). Happiness is most choiceworthy and self-sufficient; we choose every other virtue or good for both the virtue or good itself and also for happiness, whereas happiness is never chosen for some other good or virtue. Aristotle acknowledges that most people agree with this assertion but stresses that this does not adequately define what it means for a human to live well. In order to better state what the best good is Aristotle considers the function of a human being. What distinguishes us from other living things is our soul and its capacity to reason. It then follows for Aristotle that the function of a human being must be the soul’s expression of reason. By applying the logic that the function of any *F* is the same as the function of any excellent *F* and that any excellent *F* is a demonstration of a superior virtue of the original *F* to the idea of the function of a human being, Aristotle concludes that “the human good turns out to be the souls’ activity that expresses virtue” (1098a15-18).

There are three important distinctions to make with regard to Aristotle’s depiction of the human good. The first is Aristotle’s emphasis on activity as a necessary component of achieving *eudaimonia*. For he states that the highest good is indeed “living well and doing well in action” (1098b23) and gives the Olympic analogy: “just as Olympic prizes are not for the finest and strongest, but for contestants, since it is only these who win; so also in life only the fine and good people who act correctly win the prize” (1099a2-6). This allows Aristotle to justify the *doxa* that we cannot consider the human being that is entirely dormant to be happy. The second distinction is that *eudaimonia* is a trait garnered over a substantial period of time and not one suitable for describing children, i.e. it requires a complete life. Once again Aristotle offers us an analogy: “for one swallow does not make a spring, nor does one day; nor, similarly, does one day or short time make us blessed and happy” (1098a17-20).This requirement of a complete life brings up issues in deciding exactly when we can consider a human being happy. For if life “includes many reversals of fortune, good and bad” and that even “the most prosperous person [e.g. Priam] may fall into a terrible disaster in old age” such that “no one counts him happy” (1100a5-10) as Aristotle insists, then it seems as if no one can ever reasonably be considered *eudaimonia*given the volatility of the future and the requirement of a complete life. On the other hand, Aristotle reassures us that through virtuous behavior a man “will be happy throughout his entire life” (1100b30-35). But now this seems to conflict with Aristotle’s previous acknowledgment that happiness is not entirely up to us but instead seemingly dependent on “external goods… since we cannot, or cannot easily, do fine actions if we lack the resources” (1099a30-35). To appease these objections, Aristotle makes the following distinction between happiness and blessedness: “the happy man can never become miserable; though he will not reach blessedness, if he meet with fortunes like those of Priam” (1101a6-8). The extent to which this distinction affects peoples’ happiness seems unimportant to Aristotle for he elects to call happy all those among the living in whom complete virtue is, and is to be, fulfilled while regarding the happy-but-unblessed case to be that of rare and ill-fated fortune.

Unlike Aristotle, to me this issue seems rather important. What is the difference between a blessed and a happy human being? If it is unimportant, then it would appear that the level of our happiness in general is unimportant. If it is important, then a noteworthy portion of our happiness is dependent on fortune. Either way seems to undermine the motive for studying ethics. Recall that Aristotle sees ethical inquiry as a practical discipline from which we can improve our own happiness by living better. If our happiness is somehow tied up in fate, then ethical inquiry becomes less valuable due to the fact that it is in some fashion out of our influence and understanding. If our exact level of happiness does not matter, then ethical inquiry once again becomes less valuable because the degree to which we are happy simply less important. Clarification of this scenario would provide us with a clearer understanding of how much of our own happiness Aristotle believes is under our control.

Virtue is critical in Aristotle’s account of happiness and living well for it is the very act of expressing virtue by which one achieves happiness. But what is virtue? Aristotle puts forth that it is activity in which the soul is in accordance with reason. This activity can occur in two ways: through reasoning itself (virtue of thought) or through obeying reason (virtue of character). Virtue of thought is divided into theoretical wisdom and practical intelligence. Virtue of character is further defined as “(a) a state that decides, consisting in a mean, (b) the mean relative to us, which is defined by reference to reason, (c) i.e. to the reason by reference to which the intelligent person would define it” (1106b35-1107a4). Also known as the doctrine of the mean, this definition has three characteristics. The first is (a) the assertion of virtue as a state that decides. Aristotle assumes that “there are three conditions arising in the soul—feelings, capacities, and states” (1105b20) and that virtue must be one of these. Virtue is not feeling or appetite on the basis that we are excellent and receive praise or blame insofar as we have virtues or vices, not insofar as we have feelings. Similarly, virtue cannot be capacity “for we are neither called good nor called bad insofar as we are simply capable of feelings” (1105b29-33) and thus virtue must be a state. A virtue must also require decision and deliberation given that it is activity in the soul, for while “we are angry and afraid without decision” the virtues “are decisions of some kind, or require decision” (1106a1-5). The second characteristic of Aristotle’s definition of ethical virtue is (b) its position at the mean relative to us. The basis for this statement relates back to Aristotle’s assertion of the function of a human being. The virtue of any *F* causes the function of *F* to be performed well. Thus the virtue of a human being is what makes the soul’s expression of reason excellent. What makes us most excellent is necessarily at the mean; if we were to change in either extreme, we would become less excellent. This mean of behavior must also be different for each individual and situation because what is most excellent will be unique for each individual and situation. For example, the most excellent amount of food to eat will depend on the fitness of the individual and the goal of their action, e.g. gaining weight or losing weight. The last distinction is that (c) the mean is determined by the reasoning of an intelligent person. This is where Aristotle is allowed to introduce ambiguity into the idea of virtue, for it is not always clear what the reasoning of an intelligent person would conclude, and indeed many of our most difficult ethical dilemmas seem to have two intelligent answers.

It is also worth mentioning that the virtue of character is also concerned with feelings in addition to action. Aristotle states that the “intermediate and best condition” of proper virtue requires us to have feelings “at the right times, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way” (1106b20-25). We should not stop ourselves from having feelings but instead focus on having our feelings in the correct fashion. By considering feelings in his account of virtue Aristotle is able to later better address the issues of voluntary and involuntary action, praise and blame, and weakness of will by framing these issues within his conception of emotion.

While Aristotle entertains a discussion of virtue, it is not the focus of his inquiry, “for the purpose of our examination is not to know what virtue is, but to become good, since otherwise the inquiry would be of no benefit to us... hence we must examine the right way to act” (1103b25-35). More important than understanding virtue is understanding how to live well as dictated by virtue. To attain happiness, Aristotle concludes that we should live our lives in accordance with complete virtue via conducting our souls as to express virtue. By doing so, we will fulfill our function as human beings and achieve the highest human good, *eudaimonia*.

Epicurus believes that the best good for a human being is “freedom of the soul from disturbance” (pg. 30 sec. 128). The best method of achieving freedom of the soul is by maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. In doing so, we will no longer be in need of pleasure because “we are in need of pleasure only when we are in pain because of the absence of pleasure” (pg. 30 sec. 128). So what is the best way to maximize pleasure and minimize pain? Epicurus disagreed with the conventional wisdom that the extravagant life brought the most pleasure and insisted that indeed desire for enjoyable things, e.g. wealth, honor, or health, would only bring about anxiety and unhappiness. Instead he insisted that through detailed analysis of the optimal methods for achieving the most pleasure we would conclude that the best way for a human to live was through prudence. Through a prudent life we will have the most control over our own happiness; for if we can be completely satisfied by things easily attainable, we will have the utmost security in our pleasure and therefore will not have to live in fear of losing pleasure.

In more specific terms, Epicureanism offers four axioms from which one can maximize pleasure, achieve happiness, and grasp the good for a human being: don’t fear god, don’t worry about death, what is good is easy to get, and what is terrible is easy to endure. We should not fear god because the god, however it exists, is not concerned with humans or else it *wouldn’t be god*. In other words, Epicurus claims that by virtue of being a god, a god cannot be concerned about anything, for if a god was concerned about something, it would be distressed and thus no longer divine. We should not worry about death because death has not pertinence on life or the senses from which we feel pain. We should only be afraid of suffering yet suffering requires our senses. If we agree, as Epicurus did, that we lose perception at death, it will be impossible for us to experience pain and thus suffer after death and therefore we have no reason to fear it. One objection to this argument might be that while death certainly isn’t bad for itself, it is bad because it inhibits us from ever experiencing anything good again. Epicurus might respond to this objection by reminding us that the best good is not pleasure but rather freedom of the soul from disturbance, of which pleasure only enables. Therefore the idea of missing out on pleasure when our soul itself no longer exists, as Epicurus insisted was the case after death, becomes irrelevant because pleasure is no longer a component of our freedom. We should accept that what is good is easy to get because all that humans *need* are food, water, and shelter—all of which are readily available to us at little cost. All that I need to ensure that my soul can be free from disturbance, and thus capable of happiness, is confidence that my body will be satisfied. Thus the good things in life, i.e. those things that facilitate happiness, are easy to obtain. Finally, we should accept that what is terrible is easy to endure because if we truly examine terrible things we will find that they are relatively painless compared to the great pleasures of our lives. For example, physical suffering such as sickness is usually either chronic or severe and that regardless of which one inflicts us, they are both negligible in contrast to the great pleasure of friendship.

Stoic philosophy offered a similar ethical outlook. The Stoics believed that human happiness was derived from pleasure. But how do we attain pleasure? Epictetus, an illustrator of Stoic thought, believed that pleasure, and indeed the best good for a human being, consisted in living in accordance with nature. Living in accordance with nature is a complex ideal but is summarized by Epictetus by his statement: “do not seek to have events happen as you want them to, but instead want them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go well” (pg. 13 sec. 8). In other words, the very best way, and indeed the only way, for any course of events to happen is *how they actually happened*. Moreover, rather than wishing these events had happened in another fashion, we must derive complete satisfaction from how they actually happened. To always be completely happy from any (or the) course of events would be to be in complete alignment with nature.

This model of the sage, or one who is in complete accordance with nature, might appear to be extremely difficult if not impossible to achieve for a normal human being. Nonetheless the Stoics insist that by trying our best to achieve this condition we will improve upon our own *eudaimonia*. It might be easier for us to adopt these Stoic ethical assertions if we also better understood their assertions of determinism and providence, for then we could transfer the energy we currently place on changing the course of events onto other things under our control. The Stoics claimed that there existed some causal order to the world, or fate, which was unalterable by human beings. At the same time, the Stoics, or at least Chryssipus and Epictetus, held that many things are indeed within our control, including our will, character, and, ultimately, our actions. Chryssipus additionally provides the analogy of throwing a cylinder down a slope. The cylinder will roll down the slope as a reaction to my throwing it down, but the fashion in which it rolls is dependent on its individual shape and weight. Epictetus also attempts to appease these seemingly conflicting points of view by dividing what is up to us and not up to us. Things that are up to us are “whatever is our own doing” whereas things that are not up to us are “whatever is not our own doing” (pg. 11 sec. 1). In other words, what is our own is how we perceive and interact with the appearances of the unalterable external world, perhaps best described as our soul. But even our soul might not entirely be up to us, given Epictetus’s view that even life is something that is not ours. In this case, whatever is our own doing might best be described as our soul insofar as we are given life. What is not up to us then are all things external to our soul including our bodies, material possessions, honor and life itself.