

The theme of righteousness, joy and ethics in aristotle's book nicomachean ethics...

[Philosophy](#)



Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics

The state of being happy is different for all people—some people may think that happiness is achieved by surrounding yourself with family and friends who love you. Others might think that happiness is acquired through sumptuous living, wealth, and honor. Though most people have different understandings of the true meaning of happiness and how it is acquired, Aristotle explains that happiness is different for everyone, though he believes it to be an overall state of true wellbeing, fulfillment, and success. For Aristotle, happiness is the ultimate good that we should strive to achieve, and all our activities should aim towards this higher good (Nicomachean Ethics I. 4 1095b16-11096b20). He says that if “ X” has a function, then the good resides in performing this function through the best and excellent manner possible, and as the good and wise person would do it. Through understanding his Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle explains that we can learn to be and act the best if we follow his Doctrine of the Mean or Theory of Moderation (NE I. 7 1098a8-11098b5). His theory explains that virtue, both moral and intellectual, consists of finding a desirable ground between two opposite extremes. This is why Aristotle believes that there are two means of acquiring moral virtue or Excellency. The first one is a mathematical mean, which is the same for everybody and does not change—it is always in the exact middle. The second type of mean is the mean relative to us, which he defines as having a good or exact amount of a certain characteristic, which is determined by reason. This mean is not the same for all and does not equal relativism (NE II. 6 1106b4 1106b9). One cannot decide what he believes to be the right amount of “ goodness” for himself, because this amount is set in

stone—there is an exact amount per person. Aristotle claims that in a certain situation or in a certain circumstance, there is a good and right way of acting as the “ good person would” (NE I. 12 1102a5-1102a33). He clarifies that ethics is not an exact science because there are always different ways to achieve the best way of acting as a good person would—it is our job to find out the mean relative to us in certain situations. The person who achieves eudaimonia or happiness through following moral virtue in the best way possible, ultimately lives the good life (NE II. 1 1104a1-1104a13).

Aristotle says that each person has two types of virtues (NE II. 1 1103a1-1103a20). The first one is the moral virtue, which refers to the assets of our character and includes a person’s appetites, actions, and emotions. Some of these virtues include bravery, temperance, and generosity. Moral virtue, or an Excellency of character, is what a person develops through nature, upbringing, habit, and practice/effort. Aristotle believes that the two ways to acquire or have the ability “ to do” is through nature, known as the senses, and through effort and practice, known as the arts (NE I. 13 1103a20-1103b2). Aristotle says that a person’s character initially starts with nature and forms in the womb. It continues to develop by the way a parent raises his or her child and by the age of reason, the child is able to make his own decisions (NE I. 13 1103a20-1103a25). For example, if a parent allows for his child to eat whatever he pleases, the child will eventually form a habit of eating whatever he wants, whenever he wants. This type of person lacks moral virtue, because he leans towards two extremes or vices—the excess is licentiousness and the deficiency is insensibility (NE II. 1 1104a2-1104a1104b39). To be morally virtuous would mean that the child does not

eat too much or too little, but because he is in habit of being intemperate, it is difficult for him to change his habit in order to know the mean or virtue of his appetites (NE II. 2 1104b3-1104b10). When he eventually reaches the age of rationality, he will make the same decisions over and over again because he is now accustomed to this habit. He is unable to preserve any type of goodness because he is in the condition of self indulgence. Aristotle says that “ The self-indulgent man, then, craves for all pleasant things or those that are most pleasant, and is led by his appetite to choose these at the cost of everything else; hence, he is pained both when he fails to get them and when he is merely craving for them” (NE III. 11 1119a1-1119a4). Another way Aristotle believes that moral virtue is acquired is through the theory of *mousikē*. Arts and media attention greatly affect the way people think and behave, so certain censorship is needed in order for a person to be morally excellent. For example, if a person chooses to become an artist, he should spend some of his time practicing his art. If he spends too much or too little time practicing proficiency, he will have the characteristics of two opposite or extreme vices. For him to be in a virtuous state, the right amount of practice would be needed. It is better to practice the arts too much rather than too little, but in this case, the perfect amount should be achieved through moderation (NE I. 4 1095b16-11096b20).

A big part of Aristotle’s theory of moral virtue includes the health analogy. As mentioned above, if a child eats too much or too little, then he follows two opposite vices, both extreme and deficient. The perfect amount for Aristotle does not lie in the middle; rather, it lies towards one extreme or the other.

Aristotle’s health analogy explains that diet, exercise, and rest, in

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moderation, all lead to a virtuous state. Since the purpose of moral virtue is to reach an excellent state, having a healthy diet and exercising will lead one to achieve the best state of his body. Once the best state is achieved, you can relax, maintain, and preserve your body, which further allows for the continuance of moral virtue (NE I. 6 1096b11-1096b26). When you practice these “ goods” for your body, you acquire a state or condition that is the best possible for yourself. Through good habit and practice, you positively increase your health, preserve your body, and ultimately, you have produced the best and most excellent state for yourself. For example, if we have a scale and look at one end where there are people who are extremely sick and have poor health conditions, the mean does not lie with them. If we look at the middle where there are healthy people with no diseases, they are still average because they may have some deficiencies within them. If we look at the other end or extreme where all the people with excellent health fall under, there is a virtuous state present. Of course, the people with the excellent health are the best and the goal is to be very close to that one extreme (NE I. 4 1096b35-1097a14). As health is a good condition of the body, moral virtue is a good condition of the soul, and when one performs his best, he can reach an excellent state.

Acting morally does not only mean that we acquire the moral virtues, but we also need the intellectual virtue of prudence. It is one thing to have the right motive through morally good intentions, but it is another thing to choose the right course of action through exhibiting prudence. This is why the second virtue is intellectual virtue, which refers to the assets of our mind and includes a person’s theoretical, productive, and practical reasoning (NE VI. 8

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1142b4-1143a19). Intellectual virtue is also acquired through habit and continuous practice. Aristotle refers to theoretical reasoning as the process of teaching and learning by wisdom, knowledge, and reason. The productive reasoning comes from the Greek word “Techne”, which means knowledge or craft. And lastly, practical reasoning is acquired from practical wisdom and prudence (NE VI. 11 1143b17-1144a2). Aristotle believes that theoretical wisdom is the best and most complete because only humans and gods have the ability to apply it, whereas productive or practical wisdom can concern animals as well (NE III. 5 1141b 8-1141b13). The main reason theoretical virtue is the most important is because it concerns the Greek word “Sophia”, which means wisdom. Aristotle says that as soon as one acquires wisdom, he is able to possess all the rest of the virtues, and therefore, he can make the best decisions possible through the use of theoretical reasoning (NE VI. 13 1145a1-1145a10). Both moral and intellectual virtues work hand in hand to achieve Excellency; thus, they need to be executed in such a manner to reach eudaimonia (or any other best state/condition) as the end result.

Since the gist of Aristotle’s Ethics consists of abiding and following the laws of moral and intellectual virtues to achieve happiness, he claims that the two parts of moral virtue are its genus and its species. The genus is the “class” or subject of interest, such as a human, animal, or any other object. The certain subject of interest has a particular state of character. The differentia is a characteristic, quality, or substance of the subject that clearly distinguishes the genus from one another (NE II. 5 1106a14-1106a24). The terms genus and species can be understood through the basic analogy of <https://assignbuster.com/the-theme-of-righteousness-joy-and-ethics-in-aristotles-book-nicomachean-ethics/>

human beings. For example, the genus of a human is that he is an animal. The differentia or the distinguishing characteristic of a human that sets him apart from any other subject matter is that he is rational; thus, Aristotle believes that humans are rational animals. The genus (animal) and differentia (rationality) make up the entire species (human beings) (NE II. 5 1106a24-1106a36).

As understood previously, the genus refers to the general kind of thing “ X” is—the genus of a human is that he is an animal (NE II. 5 1106a1-1106a12). For Aristotle, the genus of moral virtue is the state of character that ranges in a wide variety of extremes—from best to worst. The goal of moral virtue is to reach an excellent state of character, which is quite rare to achieve. By examining the genus, we are able to understand the different ranges of the state, how these states come about, and what they do for us. These states of character include passions, feelings, and the capacity for feelings. The state of character comes about through habit and practice, as all moral virtues do (NE II. 5 1105b29-1106a3). By performing similar activities, one acquires a certain state of character, which can either be good or bad. For example, the feeling of anger comes about through habitually feeling too much or too little. On one extreme, if somebody feels too much anger, then they are said to be excessive with their feelings. On the other hand, if somebody feels too little anger, then they are said to be deficient with their feelings. The virtue lies between one mean and the other; in this case, it is always better to be less angry than to show too much anger. Aristotle says that the main goal is to not be too close to one extreme or too far from the mean (NE II. 7 1108a4-1108a10). The goal of the state of character within the genus is to find a

relative mean for ourselves. Another great example that Aristotle provides is with confidence. A person who feels too much or too little confidence, whether they are taught by their upbringing or by their own age of rationality, lies on two opposite extremes of the scale. If they feel too much confidence as a habit, then they are said to be rash. If they feel too little confidence as a habit, then they are a coward. The best and most desired mean is to be courageous and to have right amount of bravery (NE II. 6 1107b32-1107b8). These states encompass how one is with respect to his emotions, appetites, and character. Just like Plato, Aristotle mentions that these three categories should be taken into consideration through moderation, and having too much or too little of either one leads to a non-virtuous, moral state (NE II. 7 1109a1-1109a14).

The species of moral virtue refers to the specific state of character that the subject is in. For Aristotle, this is not just any state of character, but it is the absolute best state possible that one can achieve. This state lies right in the mean and the virtuous person always knows the difference between the right amounts in regards to the two extremes (NE II. 4 1105b5-1105b15). Just like the genus of moral virtue, the species concerns actions and feelings, but not all. An example of a virtuous state of character is seen with generosity. A person who donates money to a charity can be known as a generous person, but if they do it for the wrong reasons, such as honor or pride, then they are not virtuous. It is one thing to donate for a noble cause, but it is another thing to donate based upon the amounts. One has to look at how much he can afford to give away. If he is able to donate a hundred dollars and chooses to donate more or less than his mean, then he is not morally

virtuous. For Aristotle, it is not the amount that matters; rather, it is one's good character and intention to give (NE II. 7 1107b9-1107b21). If a person donates too much in hopes of recognition and honor, then he has too much ambition, and if a person donates too little than he is able to, then he lacks ambition and is mean and selfish—he follows relativism and gives according to what he thinks to be the right amount. Since he does not consider the mean relative to himself, it is difficult for him to change his habit and know the mean or virtue of his actions (NE II. 7 1107b22-1108a3). Aristotle says, “With regard to giving and taking of money the mean is liberality, the excess and defect prodigality and meanness. In these actions people exceed and fall short in contrary ways; the prodigal exceeds in spending and falls short in taking, while the mean man exceeds in taking and falls short in spending” (NE III. 7 1107b9-1107b14). When it comes to generosity, it is always better to give too much (excess) than to give too little (defect). These specific states come about through similar activity and repetitive practice. As mentioned earlier, the species concerns actions and feelings, but not all actions or feelings. For example, if a person commits murders through his habit and practice, then this is not a passion which can fall in between the two extremes. There are no “right” amount of murders a person can commit and there are no “wrong” amount of murders that a person can commit; it is an unjust act and does not fall within any type of vice or virtue (NE II. 5 1105b21-1106a10). The same goes for having affairs, showing envy, feeling shame, and feeling spite. There is never a right amount when it comes to these actions. When it comes to these certain feelings and actions, or as Aristotle believes as our passions, they are neither vices nor virtues. We

cannot be praised or blamed for our passions, just as our passions cannot be considered good or bad. This is why Aristotle says, "...virtues are modes of choice or involve choice. Further, in respect of the passions we are said to be moved, but in respect to the virtues and the vices, we are said not to be moved but to be disposed in a particular way...If then, virtues are neither passions nor faculties...then they are states of character" (NE II. 5 1106a3-1106a11). He refers to the genus as being the states of character and the species are supposed to encompass the morally best virtues. But not all states of character are virtuous, so any type of immoral passions or feelings is not highly looked upon. In the entirety of his Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle continuously refers to the Doctrine of the Mean and the different ranges that people fall into. He constantly explains that moral virtue is achieved by lying close to one vice more than the other and the best state of character is achieved through the finding and choosing the right mean.

In respect to the Doctrine of the Mean, Aristotle also mentions the particulars. Unlike Plato, who focuses more on the big picture or the universal aspect, Aristotle chooses to focus on the particulars—who, what, where, when, why, and how of moral virtue. He believes that the particulars enable us to determine the right person, the right amount, the right means, the right situation, the right time, the right goal, and etc of a situation (NE III. 5 1114b26-1115a2). For example, Plato claims that instances of beauty or justice exist only because they partake in the universal form of Beauty or Justice. Whereas Plato believes in a universal format, Aristotle refutes his Theory of Forms and says that beauty or justice does have particular instances from which they are derived, and it is up to us to pick out the

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particular instances in the subject matter. If we take the beauty of a woman for example, Aristotle would claim that we would need to pick out the small details of her beauty, which lead to her overall existence in the form of Beauty. Just because she is beautiful does not mean that she exists in the universal definition of beauty. One woman may have beautiful eyes, while the other has a beautiful smile. By picking out the small particulars, such as who or what or when in a subject matter, we are better able to understand the moral scope or big picture, in this case, of beauty. The particulars allows for us to examine closely the details and descriptions of our fore coming actions, emotions, and feelings. If we are able to choose certain particulars and are able to take the time to think things through, then we ultimately can reach moral virtue (NE IV. 11 1143a31-1143b3). You must get all the particulars right in order to achieve a virtuous state. Though this was only briefly discussed in class, I interpreted his theory of the particulars to the best of my ability.

Thus far, the discussion of the two types of virtues, how/ why they are acquired, what they consist of, The Theory of Moderation, and several examples of different virtues have taken place. But what is the end result? What exactly is the purpose of discussing moral virtues and their importance? Let's look at the definition that Aristotle gives for moral virtue— it is a state of character that is chosen, which lies in the Doctrine of the Mean relative to us, and is determined by reason as the prudent person would do it (NE II. 6 1106a14-1106a24). Aristotle says that we must perform acts which flow from good character vs. acts that create a good character, and we must not deliberate about the ends, but the means through which the ends are

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eventually produced from. For example, let's refer back to generosity. Being generous is a moral virtue and should be executed from a firm and stable character as the good person would do it. If somebody intends to be generous in order to gain glory or honor, then he is not morally virtuous. If somebody intends to be generous in a noble manner for a noble cause, then he is the generous person. Again, everybody has a mean relative to themselves, and it is necessary to abide by one's own mean and to the proportion in which they are capable of giving. In order to achieve Excellency, the action, feeling, or emotion must be executed in a virtuous manner. The person who performs the virtue must make sure that it is relative to his mean, he must have certain knowledge, the virtue must be chosen, and most importantly, it must be done from an unshakeable and firm character with noble intentions. Aristotle's most important focus is on the very fact that whoever carries out certain virtues must carry out those virtues in the best and most firm way possible (NE I. 5 1096a11-1098a19). When people carry out virtues in the best way possible, two goods are achieved. Through moral virtue, the agent or the person, is good and excellent, and the work he does is done in the best manner, through the best way possible. He also gives several examples of a good state of character and its characteristic/function. He says, "...every virtue or excellence both brings into good condition the thing of which it is the excellence and makes the work of that thing be done well... [For example], the excellence of a horse makes a horse both good in itself and good at running and at carrying its rider and at awaiting the attack of the enemy" (NE II. 5 1106a17-1106a22). Aristotle discusses virtues such as bravery, temperance, and

generosity as the some of the best virtues that one can achieve. The ideal person carries out these virtues in a right amount for noble ends. And when you acquire moral virtue, you reach an excellent state, which means that you have accomplished your goal of attaining eudaimonia (NE I. 10 1100b6-1100b10).