



# Western Civilization from Prehistory to 1650

Dr. Edrene S. McKay ■ (479) 855-6836 ■ Email: esm@cox-internet.com

## ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS

According to Aristotle, all human activities have some end or good at which they aim. Human activity is teleological or goal directed.

Activity	Aim or Good
Attending a university	Getting a degree
Playing a team sport	Being victorious
Rehearsing a symphony	Performing a concert
Performing a concert	Entertaining the audience

If living is the most general of all human activities, what is the end or good at which living aims?

Aristotle says that everyone agrees that the good at which living aims is Happiness, but he recognizes that people often disagree about what happiness is.

- Some identify happiness with pleasure. (e.g., Mill)
- Others identify happiness with being honored by others.
- Still others identify happiness with virtue.

So What Is Happiness?--Nine Points

**1. Happiness is a final end.** Happiness is not something chosen as a means to some other thing. Because of this, wealth cannot be identified with happiness, since wealth is usually desired as a means to something else.

**2. Happiness and Goodness are not separate ends. Greek Analogy--Happiness is the goodness of person's soul (psyche) as health is the goodness of a person's body.** Compare the following pieces of advice:

- Do not seek to be happy, seek to be deserving of happiness.
- Do not seek to be healthy, seek to be deserving of health.

The Greeks would have found the first as puzzling as we find the second.

The Greek word **eudaimonia**, translated as 'happiness' or 'human flourishing', includes both the notion of behaving well and the notion of faring well (being a good person, doing well in life). Ancient Greeks believed that **GOODNESS** and **PROSPERITY** cannot be entirely divorced. By contrast, we have a tendency to identify goodness with **inner** features of a person's life, and happiness with **outer** features of a person's life.

In our culture, many people believe that the concepts of a good person and a good (happy) life are distinct. For many of us, a good life is a prosperous life, one in which an individual has the means to acquire those things which bring pleasure. By contrast, a good person is one who never actually does or never intends to bring evil or harm to others (echoes of Mill and Kant).

Thus, like Kant, we do not find it paradoxical to imagine a good person who suffers an unhappy life. The ancient Greeks, including Aristotle, would have found this possibility paradoxical. Apparently, the ancient Hebrews also found this combination puzzling; Job's friends assume that his suffering is the result of something evil he has done. Otherwise why would God allow him to suffer so much?

**3. Often we regard a GOOD thing as a thing which performs its function well.** So Aristotle asks, What function or capacity do human beings have which is peculiar to them?

**Activities involving nutrition & growth?** No, these are not unique to human beings. Plants and animals have the capacity for activities of this kind.

**Activities involving sensory experiences (pleasure)?** No, these are not unique to human beings. Many animals have the capacity for activities of this kind.

**Activities involving the exercise of reason and intelligence?** Yes, Aristotle thought our powers of reason and level of intelligence separate us from all other living things. Aristotle believed that our rational soul gave us the ability to perform such activities.

**Therefore, according to Aristotle, the function of human beings is to live a life filled with activities which require the exercise of our reason or intelligence. And a good (happy) life will be one in which such activities are performed well.**

#### **4. Two types of human activities involving the exercise of reason**

**Theoretical (Intellectual) Activity**--Behavior that involves the exercise of reason alone. Aristotle believed that a life of contemplation was the best kind of life.

**Practical (Moral) Activity**--Behavior that can be developed, regulated and controlled by reason or intelligence. (Contrast with reflexes or instincts--behaviors which are usually done automatically, that is, without thinking)

**5. To be done well, either type of activity has to be performed with a degree of excellence. The Greek word for excellence was VIRTUE. Thus, for Aristotle happiness can be defined as follows: "activity of soul [intelligence or reason] in accordance with virtue, . . . and in a complete life. For as one swallow or one day does not make a spring, so one day or a short time does not make a man blessed or happy...." (p. 411)**

#### **WHAT IS VIRTUE?**

**6. Two types of Virtue**--Since there are two basic types of activities, there are two sets of virtues: the **intellectual virtues** and the **moral virtues**.

**7. Training is essential**--Virtues are not innate, but acquired. The Intellectual Virtues are acquired through teaching, and the Moral Virtues are acquired through habit, that is, through repeated activities in which we practice being virtuous. Aristotle believed that moral training was "all-important." (p. 412)

Through such training we develop virtuous characters. Our characters are just as important as the consequences of our actions. A good action is one with good consequences that is done by a person who has a virtuous character. Yet moral training is not simply the internalization of rules.

**8. Ethical Reasoning is not scientifically exact**--"questions of conduct and expediency no more admit of hard and fast rules than questions of health." (p. 395) The right or good action may vary depending on the people involved and the overall situation. Ethics cannot be reduced to a set of rules (as Mill and Kant seemed to believe), but instead requires that we strive to model our lives after those who have achieved **eudaimonia**.

Aristotle's position is **not** the same as moral relativism. A moral relativist believes that there are **no** universal ethical truths. Aristotle thinks that there are universal ethical truths even though on some occasions the "experts" might be unable to agree what the right action is.

**9. Those who seek to develop virtuous characters should follow certain moral heuristics, i.e. rule of thumb. For Aristotle, the most important of these is "Virtue is the Mean between Two Extremes."**

In matters of bodily health, too much, or too little of something often makes one ill: sleep, food, drink, exercise, can be unhealthy if we have too little or too much. Health is found between the extremes. Aristotle believed that the health of a soul (psyche) required similar advice--we should seek to develop character traits that fall in the mean between deficiency and excess.

Vice of Deficiency	Virtue	Vice of Excess
Cowardly	Courageous	Foolhardy
Puritanical	Temperate	Licentious
Stingy	Liberal	Spendthrift

URL: <http://www.siu.edu/~philos/faculty/Manfredi/intro/ethics/aristotle.html>



### Excerpts from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1.7)

Let us again return to the good we are seeking, and ask what it can be. It seems different in different actions and arts; it is different in medicine, in strategy, and in the other arts likewise. What then is the good of each? Surely that for whose sake everything else is done. In medicine this is health, in strategy victory, in architecture a house, in any other sphere something else, and in every action and pursuit the end; for it is for the sake of this that all men do whatever else they do. Therefore, if there is an end for all that we do, this will be the good achievable by action, and if there are more than one, these will be the goods achievable by action.

So the argument has by a different course reached the same point; but we must try to state this even more clearly. Since there are evidently more than one end, and we choose some of these (e.g. wealth, flutes, and in general instruments) for the sake of something else, clearly not all ends are final ends; but the chief good is evidently something final. Therefore, if there is only one final end, this will be what we are seeking, and if there are more than one, the most final of these will be what we are seeking. Now we call that which is in itself worthy of pursuit more final than that which is worthy of pursuit for the sake of something else, and that which is never desirable for the sake of something else more final than the things that are desirable both in themselves and for the sake of that other thing, and therefore we call final without qualification that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else.

Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for self and never for the sake of something else, but honour, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that by means of them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself.

From the point of view of self-sufficiency the same result seems to follow; for the final good is thought to be self-sufficient. Now by self-sufficient we do not mean that which is sufficient for a man by himself, for one who lives a solitary life, but also for parents, children, wife, and in general for his friends and fellow citizens, since man is born for citizenship. But some limit must be set to this; for if we extend our requirement to ancestors and descendants and friends' friends we are in for an infinite series. Let us examine this question, however, on another occasion; the self-sufficient we now define as that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing; and such we think happiness to be; and further we think it most desirable of all things, without being counted as one good thing among others- if it were so counted it would clearly be made more desirable by the addition of even the least of goods; for that which is added becomes an excess of goods, and of goods the greater is always more desirable. Happiness, then, is something final and self-sufficient, and is the end of action.

Presumably, however, to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account of what it is still desired. This might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function of man. For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or an artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function. Have the carpenter, then, and

the tanner certain functions or activities, and has man none? Is he born without a function? Or as eye, hand, foot, and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these? What then can this be? Life seems to be common even to plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but it also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle; of this, one part has such a principle in the sense of being obedient to one, the other in the sense of possessing one and exercising thought. And, as 'life of the rational element' also has two meanings, we must state that life in the sense of activity is what we mean; for this seems to be the more proper sense of the term. Now if the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle, and if we say 'so-and-so-and 'a good so-and-so' have a function which is the same in kind, e.g. a lyre, and a good lyre-player, and so without qualification in all cases, eminence in respect of goodness being added to the name of the function (for the function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre, and that of a good lyre-player is to do so well): if this is the case, and we state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete.

But we must add 'in a complete life.' For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy.