



## Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

### The virtue of a good life

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## Important ideas and claims

- Aristotle has two central arguments for the existence of a highest good for human beings.
- He calls this highest good "*eudaimonia*," which means, roughly "what makes life worth living," and which is translated "happiness" in our text.
- He claims that there is an essential and fundamental connection between being a virtuous person, and having a good life.
- Aristotle understands virtue in terms of "the mean:" the right action to take is between two extremes.



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## Overview of What We'll Cover

We will cover Aristotle's views about the following:

- Basic ideas about what *eudaimonia* is.
- An argument for *eudaimonia*.
- The aim of human life, as understood in terms of Aristotle's *eudaimonia* and *ergon* ("function").
- Aristotle's view about what virtue (*aretē*) is.
- Why being virtuous will lead to having a fulfilled life.
- His division of virtues into two kinds, virtues of intellect and virtues of character.
- The "golden mean" as a guide for acting in the right way.



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## Eudaimonia: A Notion of Central Importance

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- *Eudaimonia* is of central importance in Aristotle's ethics.
- Unfortunately, it does not translate straightforwardly into any one single English term: it seems to take on different meanings in different contexts.
- Its meaning takes on shades of each of the following, in different contexts.
  - Happiness
  - Fulfillment
  - Well-being
  - Satisfaction



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## So Then, what does "*Eudaimonia*" Mean?

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### The meaning of *eudaimonia*

For our purposes, in general, *eudaimonia* will be understood to mean *human fulfillment*, that is, to indicate a *fulfilled human life*.



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## Some Important Characteristics of *Eudaimonia*

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- *Eudaimonia* indicates whatever it is that, for human beings, makes life worth living.
- So, we will say that a person who has *eudaimonia* can be said to have had (or be having) *a good life*.
- *Eudaimonia* is not the same as "happiness." "Happiness" can indicate state of contentedness or pleasant feeling.
- *Eudaimonia* does not mean that a person that has it is a morally good person or a virtuous person. He has to show that there is a connection between them
  - A central question of Aristotle's ethics is, "What is the relationship between *eudaimonia* and moral goodness or virtue?"



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## *Eudaimonia* Further Explained

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- One way of describing a life of *eudaimonia* might be: describe all of the activities that a life of *eudaimonia* includes.
- On this suggestion, we ask, "What are the things that someone who leads a fulfilled life does during that life?"
- A better way to understand *eudaimonia* would be to try to understand what is it about a life of *eudaimonia* that *explains* what makes that life worthwhile.
- That is, we ask the question, "Why does someone who has a good life, have that good life?" or "Why is a good life, good?"



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## Eudaimonia Further Explained, Further

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**Question** How might something *explain what makes a life worthwhile*?

**Answer** Something might explain what it makes a life worthwhile by being:

- ① A good that is complete, that is, that someone wants for its own sake; and
- ② Self-sufficient (independent), that is, nothing added to it would make it better; and
- ③ A good that justifies all other goods.

**Comment** As we will see, these three characteristics of the good are important in each of Aristotle's arguments about *eudaimonia*.

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## An Argument for Eudaimonia

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- Aristotle develops two arguments for the claim that there is such a thing as *eudaimonia*.
- The first argument is built around the idea that there is a *hierarchy of values*.
- This is the argument we now look at.
- We begin with an account of the relationships in value between *actions* and *ends*.

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## "For the Good of" and the Like: The Vocabulary of Action and Decision

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- Suppose that someone intends to, and actually does, carry out an action *A* in order to achieve end *E*.  
Example Phaedra strings her bow and arrow (action *A*) in order to kill enemies (end *E*).
- We will say that action *A* is *good because of end E*. The action *A* helps us to attain *E*, and so it is good for that purpose (i.e., of value for that purpose).
- Similarly, we say that *A* is done *for the sake of end E*.
- In yet another way of speaking of the same thing: the action *A* *has the end of attaining end E*.



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## The Bow Example, Continued

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- We will say that Phaedra strings her bow and arrow for the sake killing enemies;
- Or, that her doing so has the end of killing enemies;
- Or, that her doing so is good because it is necessary for killing enemies; or,
- That stringing her bow is *good because it will contribute to her success in killing enemies.*



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## More Vocabulary: The Relationship in Value Between Ends and Actions

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- An end *E* is understood to be *better than* or to be *greater in value than* the actions *A* that someone engages in to attain *E*.  
Example For Phaedra, killing enemies is *better than* and has *greater value than* stringing her bow.
- The action *A* only exists because the person engaging in it wants to attain end *E*.
- That is, the action *A* only has any value at all because the person engaging in it wants to attain end *E*.  
Example Phaedra may have strung her bow for other reasons; but here, she's doing so only in order to kill enemies. So this is why here, her bow-stringing has value, i.e., is good.



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## Overview of the argument for *Eudaimonia*

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- Now that we've seen that actions and ends can be arranged *in hierarchies of value*, we can take a look at an argument Aristotle makes that there must be *eudaimonia*.
- The main idea is as follows.
  - Every action is good for some end, so if there were no single action at which everything aims, *all* of our actions would be meaningless.
  - We'd have no reason to act.
  - But, we know we do act—so we know that there must be something at which every action aims.
- We now look at how this argument may be stated, and how it should be understood.



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## An Argument for *Eudaimonia*

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- ① Every action is good for some end, that is, every action aims to bring about something that is *higher in value* than itself.
- ② Suppose that were a never-ending hierarchy of actions. That is, suppose that, for every action, there were *always* something better, at which the action aims.
- ③ Then we'd never take any actions. Since we'd know that there's always something higher in value than whatever we aim at on a given occasion, we'd have no reason try anymore. Some of our actions would be wasted.
- ④ Therefore, there must be something that everything aims at, and that is not good for attaining some higher aim. This is *eudaimonia*.



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## How Does *Eudaimonia* fit in with a Good Life?

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- Recall that earlier we said that whatever *eudaimonia* is, it is the best good for human beings; i.e.,
- It is what makes life worth living—it's what makes a life fulfilled.
- It is the good at which all other goods point to: every act in a person's life aims, ultimately, at causing that person's *eudaimonia*.
- Consider the following example.



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## Example: Chocolate Cake

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- Suppose that Phaedra is celebrating a birthday. She asks the Royal Amazon chef, who is a member of her entourage, to bake a chocolate cake.
- On the next slide, we consider the senses in which the chocolate cake is good, and how it relates to *eudaimonia*.
- Note that we can see a variety of levels at which the cake is good, each level justified by the next higher level, and that *eudaimonia* is at the highest level of value and choice-worthiness.



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## The Chocolate Cake and Phaedra's *Eudaimonia*

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- ① The cake is good because it tastes good and represents indulgence. And that's good because . . .
- ② It creates a feeling among those at the birthday celebration that they are there together to share in a fun and pleasant occasion that marks an important event in her. And that's good because . . .
- ③ It strengthens the bonds of friendship among them. And that's good because . . .
- ④ Friendship is an important part of *living a worthwhile life, that is, of eudaimonia*.



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## What if there Weren't a Highest Good?

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- 1 Well, then, *no one would make cakes or celebrate anything at all.*
- 2 *Eudaimonia* is what all the actions described in connection with Phaedre's birthday aim at accomplishing.
- 3 Take that away, and there's no reason to try anything any more.
- 4 Consider:
  - Why do  $A_1$ ? To get  $E_1$ . Why is  $E_1$  important? We can use it to get  $A_2$ , which we can use to get  $E_2$
  - But wait, oh no, there is a never-ending sequence of action-end pairs.
  - So why start out in the first place? The *entire sequence* of actions and ends cannot be justified.



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## Aristotle's View about Value and Purpose

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- A thing  $T$  is a *good T* if (and only if) it successfully carries out its purpose.
  - Hammer A hammer is a good hammer if it is used successfully for pounding in nails.
  - Tree A tree is a good tree if it does whatever trees are supposed to do.
  - Leaf A leaf on a tree is a good leaf if it does whatever leaves are supposed to do.
- This can be extended to people: according to Aristotle, a person is a good person if he or she does whatever it is that a person is supposed to do.



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## "Ergon" Means "Function" or "Purpose"

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### An important vocabulary term

- "*Ergon*" means "function" or "purpose." So, for instance:
  - The *ergon* of a hammer is to pound in nails;
  - The *ergon* of a coffee cup is to hold coffee;
  - The *ergon* of a lacrosse stick is to catch and throw the ball when playing lacrosse.



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## What is a Human Being's *Ergon*?

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- Aristotle believes that human beings have a purpose that is distinct from the purpose of other forms of life.
- This sets up the question, what is it that human beings can do that no other form of life can? Consider:
  - Plants Take in food and grow.
  - Animals Take in food and grow, and sense their environment.
  - People Take in food and grow; sense their environment; *and use their reason.*
- Aristotle's conclusion is that the purpose (*ergon*) of a human being is to *use reason*: "the human function is activity of the soul in accord with reason or requiring reason" (*EN I:7*).



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## Aristotle's View of Human Purpose

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### Aristotle's view of human purpose

[If] . . . 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 the soul in conformity with excellence, and if there are more than one excellence, in conformity with the best and most complete.*(*EN I:7*)



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## A Connection Between Human *Ergon* & Virtue

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- Recall Aristotle's view about the relationship between purpose and goodness (See slide entitled "Aristotle's View about Value and Purpose," above).
  - Goodness & purpose A thing *T* is a *good T* if and only if *T* is *good at carrying out its purpose.*
- We have just seen that Aristotle believes that the purpose (*ergon*) of a human being is to use her or her reason.
- Putting this together with his view about virtue, we can reach the following conclusion.
  - Human excellence Human excellence is *excellence in the use of reason.*



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## A Central Point of Clarification About How Aristotle Understands “Virtue”

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- Aristotle does not divide moral virtue from non-moral virtue in the same way that we might do so nowadays.
- He uses the term *aretē* for “virtue” or “excellence.”
- This term may be used to describe someone who is excellent at some practical pursuit such as horseback riding, woodworking, or athletic events.
- Contrast this with the sense in which we most often use “moral virtue” or “virtue” alone nowadays.



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## Aristotle on Human Excellence and Purpose

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### Aristotle's view about human excellence and purpose

- The *ergon* of a human being is to use reason; Aristotle believes that something is good if it is good at fulfilling its purpose; so:
- Aristotle's view is that human excellence (*aretē*) is *excellence in reasoning*.



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## Human *Ergon* & *Eudaimonia*: How do They Go Together?

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We have now completed two important lines of thought  
We are now in a position to join together the two lines of thought pursued here by Aristotle, that is, the one about *eudaimonia* and the one about *ergon*.



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## The Relationship Between Human *Ergon* & *Eudaimonia*

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- Aristotle has identified *eudaimonia* (fulfillment) as the goal toward which all human actions are intended to achieve. (We recall Phaedra and the chocolate cake: some actions aim at *eudaimonia* only indirectly.)
- Furthermore, Aristotle has identified excellence in the use of reason as a kind of excellence that is uniquely human, and that is the purpose of every human being.
- Concerning purposes, Aristotle believes that anything *T* is *good at being that kind of thing T* if and only if it is good at achieving its purpose.
- What follows from all this is that excellence (*aretē*) for humans is just *eudaimonia*: an excellent human being is also a fulfilled human being.



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## Aristotle's Definition of "Virtue"

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Virtue: The mean, relative to a prudent person

Excellence, then, is a state concerned with choice lying in a mean relative to us, this being determined by reason and in the in which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. (EN II:6)



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## Comment About the "Prudent Person"

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- Note that Aristotle's definition of "virtue" makes reference to the "prudent person."
- Aristotle's suggestion is that virtue is defined in terms of the behavior of some exemplary person.
- Being virtuous means, for Aristotle, being like this exemplary person—having the abilities of this person, and using them in actions.
- Questions: who decides who the exemplary person is? What about the gangsters?



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## Comment about the "Mean Relative to Us"

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- When deciding on how it's appropriate to act in a given situation, we should take our own abilities and needs into account.
- This is what Aristotle's comment about the "mean relative to us" indicates in his definition of "virtue."
- For instance, someone who is a large person and has a large appetite might eat three slices of pizza, while a smaller person that's less hungry might only take one. Because they differ in how hungry they each are, what is excessive for one person is not excessive for the other.



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## A Concluding Remark: Aristotle's Achievement

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- In these lectures, we have followed two central lines of thought developed by Aristotle.  
Human happiness (*eudaimonia*) Arguments for the existence of human fulfillment, that there is a state at which we all aim, and that everything we do is directed toward.  
Virtue and human function (*ergon*) A human being's purpose is to use reason; and being excellent (virtuous) means carrying out one's purpose well.
- These two lines of thought come together, resulting in a unified account of human nature and the meaning of human life.
- This is an enormous achievement.



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## Two Kinds of Virtues: Book I sec. 13

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- 1 Virtues of intellect
  - Someone has a *virtue of the intellect* if and only if that person is good at problem-solving, inference, interpretation, or reasoning concerning either theoretical or practical matters.
  - These include wisdom, prudence, and comprehension.
- 2 Virtues of character
  - Someone has a *virtue of character* if and only if that person *behaves* in virtuous ways.
  - These include courage, temperance, and generosity.



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## Virtues and Parts of the Soul

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- Fact Aristotle develops a theory of human nature according to which there are two parts of the soul.
- Fact There are, as just stated, two kinds of virtues.
- Question Is it an accident that there are the same number of parts of the soul as there are virtues?
- Answer Definitely not.
- Explanation Each part of the soul is responsible for one of the two virtues.
- Fun We look deeper into the connection between virtue and parts of the soul.



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## Aristotle's Account of The Parts of the Soul

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- Like Plato, Aristotle offers a theory about the composition of a person.
- Unlike Plato, Aristotle proposes that a person has *two* parts.
 

Question How many parts of the soul does Plato claim there are?
- The two parts, according to Aristotle:
  - 1 Nonrational
  - 2 Rational



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## The Nonrational Part of the Soul

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The nonrational part of the soul has two parts to it.

- ① One part is shared with plants: the capacity to take in food and grow. (Call this the “plantlike part.”)
- ② Another part is the source of appetites and desires. This part of the nonrational part of the soul can be instructed by the rational part of the soul to act or refrain from acting. (Call this the “upper part” of the nonrational part of the soul.)
  - This part of the soul is *subject to reason*, but is not reasonable by itself.



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## The Rational Part of the Soul

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- The rational part of the soul is that part that instructs (controls, or at least, can control) the second part of the nonrational part of the soul.
- The rational part of the soul differs from the “upper” part of the nonrational part of the soul because the rational part of the soul *contains* reason, and *is reasonable by itself*: it can do more than just *listen to reason*.



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## Two Kinds of Virtues, Two Parts of the Soul

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- ① The virtues of character are excellences of the nonrational part of the soul—the “upper” nonrational part.
- ② The virtues of intellect are excellences of the rational part of the soul, the part that can control the “upper” nonrational part of the soul.



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# The Golden Mean

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- By “mean,” Aristotle wants to indicate *the mid-point between two extremes*.
- The idea is that, whatever situation a person finds him- or herself in, there is an *appropriate proportional response*.
- Aristotle thinks that response is usually not extreme, but falls along the mean between two extremes.
- Each kind of action can be looked at in many ways: in terms of emotions, attitudes and behavior.
- Each of these different perspectives requires a proportional response of a certain kind.
- In some cases, the mean does not actually apply. Aristotle provides at best a guideline for action.

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# The Unholy Trinity: Food, Sex, and Drink

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- Let's look at each and see what perspectives someone has to take into account when acting virtuously.
- Consider what the mean and extremes are in each case.

**Eating** Time, place, amount, what's eaten, manner of eating. Relation to health, pleasure, other people's feelings and needs.

**Drinking** Time, place, amount; kind of drink; your tolerance; company one keeps when drinking.

**Sex** Time, place, amount; intensity; choice of partner—age, gender, relationship to you; purpose.

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