

Aristotle on ethics: central ideas
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1. Introduction

Aristotle is a virtue theorist. Virtue ethics is one way of thinking about what is right and wrong, good and bad, in general. Its distinct claim is that we can only know what to do when we have figured out what type of person a morally good, or virtuous, person is. This is sometimes expressed by saying that the question ‘how shall I be?’ comes before the question ‘what should I do?’. A virtuous person is someone who has the virtues, morally good traits of character. According to virtue ethics, an action is right, roughly, if it is an action that a virtuous person would do. A right action, then, will express morally good traits of character, and this is what makes it right. Telling the truth expresses honesty, standing up to a bully expresses courage, and so on. Our main aim in leading a good life, therefore, should be to develop the virtues, because then we will know what it is right to do and we will want to do it.

2. The good life

Here’s one way to think about morality: the aim or purpose of morality is to help us lead the best life we can, a life that is good and happy. But what is it to live a life that is good? Virtue ethics insists that it is more than just ‘doing the right thing’. Living a good life means being a good person as well. After all, you could do the right thing all your life, but never enjoy it. You will have led an unhappy life, not the best life someone can lead. Morality is about achieving the very best life.

But what is this? Aristotle argued that the best life – which he called *eudaimonia* – involved living in accordance with reason. People can do things and feel things ‘for the wrong reasons’; we can act out of spite or envy, we can spend money to try to impress other people, we can feel angry too quickly, or resentment too often. There are lots of ways in which we can act, feel and react ‘unreasonably’. To live a good life, Aristotle argued, is to live a life that is in accordance with reason. As these examples show, this means more than justing *doing* certain actions and avoiding doing others; it means doing things *for the right reasons*, and it means having appropriate *feelings*.

3. What is a virtue?

A virtue is a trait of mind or character that helps us achieve a good life. Aristotle’s word was *arete*, which can be more generally translated as an ‘excellence’. Lots of things have ‘excellences’ in this sense, and virtues of mind and character are just specific examples. For instance, we use an axe to chop wood; a good axe will be one that chops wood well. To chop wood well, the axe needs to be sharp. And so being sharp is an excellence, a ‘virtue’, of an axe. Or again, eyes see (that’s what they *do*). A good eye sees well. So clarity of vision is an excellence of an eye.

Aristotle thought the case of human virtues was exactly similar. We have an idea of what it is to lead a life that is human (sometimes, for instance, we can say of a person who is depraved ‘they’re barely human’). And so we can also have an idea of what it is to lead a human life that is good. Virtues are traits that help us lead such a life.

There are two sorts of traits which are absolutely central to this. There is a trait of mind, called 'practical wisdom', which helps us to know what to do. It does what it says on the tin – it is wisdom about practical matters. And then, there are traits of character. Some traits of character, such as being short-tempered or greedy, stop us from leading a good life – these are vices. Other traits of character, such as being kind or courageous, help us to lead a good life – and these are the virtues. Many, if not all, virtues of character are related to our emotions and our motives. To live well, Aristotle says, we need to feel 'well', that is "to feel [emotions] at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way". What is the right time, object, person and so on is what practical wisdom helps us to know.

4. The doctrine of the mean

Aristotle defended the 'doctrine of the mean', the idea that a virtuous response or action is 'intermediate'. Just as there is a right time, object, person etc. at which to feel angry (or any emotion), some people can feel angry too often, regarding too many objects, and towards too many people (perhaps they take a critical comment as an insult), or maybe whenever they get angry, they get very angry, even at minor things. Other people can feel angry not often enough, regarding too few objects and people (perhaps they don't understand how people are taking advantage of them). Aristotle's doctrine of the mean does not claim that when you get angry, you should only ever be moderately angry. You should be as angry as the situation demands, which can be very angry.

Philosophers have generally thought that even if it is true, the doctrine of the mean doesn't help us know what the right thing to do is. Just about anything could be 'in the mean' if the circumstances were right! But Aristotle never intended the doctrine of the mean to be helpful in this way. We can't 'figure out' what it is right to do by applying a rule like the doctrine of the mean; we must have practical wisdom. And life is complicated; so practical wisdom isn't about applying easy rules either. It's about 'seeing' what to do, which requires virtues of character – so your emotional responses are right – and lots of experience.

5. An objection

Perhaps the most frequent objection to virtue ethics is that it doesn't actually help us decide what it is right to do. If I am not a virtuous person, telling me to do what a virtuous person would do doesn't help me know what to do! If I don't have practical wisdom, what next? But I think this criticism is a little unfair, since virtue theory is not intended to be applied to actions directly in this way. It doesn't aim to provide an exact method for making decisions. It has a wide scope – it applies to your whole life. Until you grow more in virtue and experience, it will be difficult to know what to do. Being told this won't change that!

But Aristotle could also say that his theory can provide some guidance by helping us think about situations in terms of the virtues. Rather than ask 'could everyone do this?' (as Kant suggests) or 'what will bring about the best consequences?' (as utilitarianism suggests), we can ask a series of questions: 'would this action be kind/courageous/loyal...?' If we think of actions as expressions of virtue, this could be very helpful. There will still be difficulties if our answers conflict, e.g. if an action would be courageous but not kind. Here Aristotle falls back on practical wisdom – when virtues seem to conflict, you need practical wisdom to see what to do.