
Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

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Introduction

If there was an ethical turn in Greek philosophy, it began with Socrates, who, unlike his predecessors, shunned speculation about the natural world and focused exclusively on ethics (Aristotle, *Metaph.* 1.6.987b1–2). His brand of ethics is what we now call “virtue ethics,” which, as the name suggests, entails an interest in the character of a moral agent and how it relates to his overall wellbeing. In general, it asks the question how one should live one’s life, with an eye to living well through managing one’s character. Socrates’ student Plato (see Plato’s *Symposium*) inherited this project, as did Plato’s student Aristotle, and it was the dominant approach to ethics for the European philosophical schools in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, as well as for philosophers in Europe and in the Islamic world during the Middle Ages. The *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle’s seminal treatise on the subject, was translated into Arabic as early as the ninth century CE, and had a profound influence on medieval Muslim philosophers such as Alfarabi and Avicenna. This approach to ethics went into decline in Europe during the Renaissance and early modern period, perhaps due to a disillusionment with its optimistic assumptions about human nature, and was eclipsed by systems of ethics that focused on assessments of actions (utilitarianism and deontology) instead of on agents and their characters. A dissatisfaction with these approaches, in turn, led to a revival of virtue ethics in the mid-twentieth century, and that revival continues to this day.

Methodology

While Aristotle may not have invented virtue ethics, he can be credited with establishing it as a distinct philosophical discipline. The opening chapters of the *Nicomachean Ethics* were tremendously influential, both in the European and Arabic philosophical traditions, because they set the terms within which various competing approaches to virtue ethics have been debated. That is, Aristotle established an enduring framework for virtue ethics by proposing a set of plausible assumptions about how it should proceed.

Aristotle thought that every science has a domain of objects that it studies, and posits “first principles” for the domain which explain important features of its objects. Since the domain relevant to ethics is human lives and the feature to be explained is their goodness, what ethics needs to posit as a first principle is the highest human good or *summum bonum* (Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 1.2). Once we have our first principle, claims Aristotle, we will be able to understand what makes a human life good, and will be able to aim at bringing this good life into being, both for ourselves and our fellow human beings. In fact, Aristotle tells us that the *Nicomachean Ethics* is meant to supply people who aspire to be politicians with an understanding of what they will be trying to achieve, which is to make the lives of the populations they serve as good as possible (1.2.1094a26–b11). How one should go about this is discussed in Aristotle’s *Politics*.

Guiding Assumptions

The highest good, then, is a goal that we try to bring about. According to Aristotle, it is the highest good because it is chosen for its own sake, and it is for its sake that everything else is chosen (1.2.1094a18–22). This assumes that goods are ranked teleologically, so that if we choose good x for the sake of good y , and good y for the sake of good z , then good z is the highest good in the series, followed by y and then x . Aristotle also assumes that all goods are related to each other in this way, so that they form a simple order terminating in a single highest good. Aristotle does not justify this assumption, but presumably thinks it is unproblematic because it is generally agreed that there is such a good and it is called “*eudaimonia*” or happiness (1.4.1094a22–26). We choose happiness for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else, and everything we do is ultimately for the sake of happiness. In fact, Aristotle claims it is a truism to say that the highest good is called “*eudaimonia*” because “*eudaimonia*” just means the highest good in this sense (1.7.1097b22–24).

Aristotle expresses the assumption that *eudaimonia* is the highest good by saying that it is *teleion*, or something final in the sense that everything is chosen for the sake of *eudaimonia* and *eudaimonia* is not chosen for the sake of anything else (1.7.1097a25–30). But *teleion* also means complete in the sense of encompassing everything of intrinsic and not mere instrumental worth. Aristotle says we choose, for instance, “honour, pleasure, reason, and every virtue” for the sake of *eudaimonia*, but also for their own sakes and not just as means to *eudaimonia* (1.7.1097b2–5). So *eudaimonia*, being *teleion*, will include these goods as constituents. This assumption was controversial and not universally accepted. Some, like Alfarabi in the Middle Ages, insisted that ethical virtue is just a means to *eudaimonia*, and not a good in itself (Alfarabi 2015, 63–64). Others, like the Stoics in the

Hellenistic period, held honor and pleasure to be goods in themselves but excluded them from *eudaimonia* (Seneca, *Ep.* 71.18, 85.19; Cicero, *Tusc.* 5.17). Only goods of the soul like understanding and virtue, they thought, could be parts of *eudaimonia*, while goods like these, though intrinsically valuable, are incommensurably less valuable than goods of the soul (Cicero, *Fin.* 3.45).

Aristotle was also emphatic that the *summum bonum*, though an ideal, should be something achievable by the average person, and he objected to Plato's Form of the Good, an occult metaphysical object that somehow makes other things good, for failing to be a thing of this sort (*Eth. Nic.* 1.6). Aristotle claims that *eudaimonia* will be "generally shared" by anyone without a wrecked character and with a modicum of care and attention (1.9.1099b18–20). This assumption was debated within the European and Arabic philosophical traditions, and some differed from Aristotle by making the *summum bonum* either very difficult or impossible to achieve in this life. The Stoics denied *eudaimonia* to all but the perfectly virtuous, who were, as they said, "rarer than the phoenix of the Ethiopians" (Alexander of Aphrodisias, *Fat.* 199.18). In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas, Alfarabi, and Avicenna each insisted that while the happiness that Aristotle spoke of was achievable, it is not the *summum bonum*. True or complete happiness, they claimed, must consist in something far loftier than virtuous action, i.e., a direct acquaintance with God (see *The Septuagint as World Literature* and *The Qur'an (Koran)*). Due to the limitations of our mortal understanding, however, it was held that this sort of happiness is primarily to be sought in the afterlife. For his part, Aristotle did not envisage the soul surviving after death, since he defined the soul as something dependent on the body, i.e., the "form of a natural body having life potentially within it" (Aristotle, *De an.* 412a19–21).

Aristotle also assumed that not only is *eudaimonia* something achievable by the average person, but also that it is something uniquely and characteristically human (*Eth. Nic.* 1.6.1097a8–13). Aristotle uses this assumption to rule out a life of pleasure, which he thinks is favored by the common run of humanity as well as by philosophical hedonists like the Epicureans, because it does not distinguish the greatest human good from goods of other animals (1.5.1095b17–22). This has remained a standard argument against philosophical hedonism, though Alfarabi and Avicenna, while affirming that *eudaimonia* is unique to human beings, nonetheless claimed the existence of loftier and uniquely human pleasures not susceptible to Aristotle's argument; loftier pleasures associated with the contemplation of God in the afterlife.

Aristotle also assumed that *eudaimonia* must be an activity, not a state or disposition (*bexis*), like a virtue. This follows from Aristotle's understanding of what a disposition is, combined with the assumption that *eudaimonia* is something final (*teleion*). Dispositions like virtues are always for the sake of their corresponding activities. Courage is for the sake of courageous action, otherwise it would be useless. This is why Aristotle says that though we might praise a virtuous person who is somehow incapacitated (e.g., physically disabled in some way that will prevent him from doing virtuous actions), we save our congratulations for those who are courageous *and* act courageously. Thus, since attaining *eudaimonia* is an occasion for congratulation and not just praise, it must consist in activity, and not a mere disposition (Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 1.8.1098b30–1099a7). It also follows from this that *eudaimonia* is not a subjective mental state, like a feeling of happiness. *Eudaimonia* is something you do, not something you merely experience.

Nearly everyone in the European and Arabic traditions assumed that *eudaimonia* must be an activity, though opinions varied about what this activity consists in. The Stoics, Alfarabi and Avicenna, for instance, each thought that a certain sort of mental activity could suffice for *eudaimonia*, while Aristotle believed that physical engagement with the world is also necessary. Perhaps the common motive is that, as Aristotle says, *eudaimonia* is thought to be “something of one’s own and not easily taken from one” (1.5.1095b25–26). What is always up to us, and does not depend on anyone else, is the manner in which we act, as opposed to anything we might achieve or obtain.

Finally, Aristotle also assumed that *eudaimonia* must be something self-sufficient (*autarkês*), which he defines as lacking in nothing that is good. This does not require, absurdly, that the happy person possess every good, but just that he possess every good that would make his life better. This is why Aristotle says that *eudaimonia* is self-sufficient by not permitting augmentation by the slightest addition (1.7.1097b6–21). Avicenna and Alfarabi follow Aristotle in this assumption. Avicenna describes happiness as an act of contemplation taking in the whole of existence, including God, which ensures that it is maximally complete and excellent (Avicenna 2005, 350). And Alfarabi, though he talks at times of degrees of happiness, nevertheless insists that there is an ultimate level of happiness that corresponds to the perfection of our rational faculty (Alfarabi 2015, 33).

Aristotle qualifies the claim that *eudaimonia* is self-sufficient because, as we have seen, *eudaimonia* is something uniquely and characteristically human, and the word *autarkês* carries with it a strong connotation of divinity. Aristotle says, “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 by nature a political [animal]” (Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 1.7.1097b6–11). That man is a political animal is repeated in the *Politics*, where Aristotle likens a human being to a piece in a board game because, just as being part of a game is constitutive of being a game piece, being part of society is constitutive of being a human being. And just as a game piece is no longer a game piece outside the context of a game, a human being is no longer a human being outside the context of human society (*Pol.* 1.2.1253a1–8). Both Avicenna and Alfarabi follow Aristotle in stressing that man is a political animal whose flourishing depends on his living within a society, with the caveat that earthly flourishing never attains to the level of the *summum bonum*. Each emphasizes that a well-functioning society requires a high degree of cooperation and division of labor, with Alfarabi likening the state to an animal in which individual citizens serve as its organs. (Alfarabi 2001, 23)

The Stoics also held *eudaimonia* to be self-sufficient (Seneca, *Ep.* 85.20, cf. Cicero, *Tusc.* 5.13), and an interesting debate arose in Hellenistic Europe about how to apply this assumption. Aristotle takes the common-sense view that since *eudaimonia* consists in a certain sort of activity, then the longer one lives while engaged in this activity the better. He says, “But we must add [that the good we seek is] ‘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” (Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 1.7.1098a18–19). The idea is that one cannot be called happy based on a short period of one’s life. So one needs to wait until the end to see how it turns out, not only to see how long it is but also to see whether it remains happy until the end. This leads to the paradox that one can only be called happy in retrospect, a result that causes Aristotle some puzzlement in the *Nicomachean Ethics*

(*Eth. Nic.* 1.11). The puzzlement, here, betrays a tension between saying that *eudaimonia* cannot be augmented, and honoring the normal intuition that the longer one's life is, the better. Aristotle cannot say that one can attain the highest good, and then have an additional benefit of living a long time in this state because then the highest good would get better and this is a contradiction. So he simply says *eudaimonia* must presuppose living a long time in a flourishing state. The Stoics address this problem by holding onto the claim that *eudaimonia* cannot be augmented, but abandoning the intuition that the longer one's life is, the better. Seneca claims that it is the quality of life, not its quantity that secures the highest good. All that is required for a happy life is that it be "full," not that it be long (Seneca, *Ep.* 85.22–23, cf. Plutarch, *Comm. not.* 1061f; Cicero, *Fin.* 3.45–46). As for the paradox that one can only be called happy in retrospect, Cicero's Cato, speaking for the Stoics, says, "Nor does [the wise man] wait for any period of time that the decision whether he has been happy or not may be finally pronounced only when he has rounded off his life's last day in death, – the famous warning so unwisely given to Croesus by old Solon, one of the seven Wise Men; for had Croesus ever been happy, he would have carried his happiness uninterrupted to the pyre raised for him by Cyrus" (Cicero, *Fin.* 3.76). Cicero is referring to the story of Lydian king Croesus in Herodotus' *Histories* book 1. When asked to comment on Croesus' happiness, Solon, one of the Seven Wise Men of Greece, gives him the traditional advice found in Aristotle, viz., that he needs to wait until the end of his life to see whether he was happy. As it happened, Croesus' life ended badly when his attempt to invade Persia failed and he was condemned by Cyrus to be burnt at the stake. The Stoic's point is that Solon was wrong, and if Croesus were ever happy, meeting the fate described by Herodotus would not have deprived him of his happiness.

The Function Argument and Virtue

Armed with these assumptions, we may now proceed to the argument for Aristotle's specification of *eudaimonia*, the so-called "function argument" in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*Eth. Nic.* 1.7.1097b24–1098a21). We have already seen that Aristotle assumes *eudaimonia* must be an activity, and since it is attainable by all human beings, this activity must be characteristic of human beings as human beings. In general, a characteristic activity of a certain sort of thing as that sort of thing is its function (*ergon*). For instance, the function or characteristic activity of a plant as a plant is to nourish itself and grow. And, as Aristotle thinks, since animals not only nourish themselves and grow, but also perceive and move about, the function or characteristic activity of an animal will include perception and movement as well as nourishment and growth. Now when Aristotle ruled out a life of pleasure as *eudaimonia*, he did it because it is not unique to humans to feel pleasure. Therefore, the function or characteristic activity that Aristotle is looking for must not only be characteristic of humans, but also unique to humans. Thus, Aristotle invokes the commonly held view that reason and speech distinguish humans from other animals to argue that the unique and characteristic activity of a human, or its function, is activity in accordance with reason (1.7.1098a7–8).

Since it is the *summum bonum*, *eudaimonia* will not be just any activity in accordance with reason, but the best sort. That is, the *summum bonum* is not just to act in accordance with reason but to do it well, or excellently (1.7.1098a8–26). The word that Aristotle uses for

excellence is *aretê*, which often gets translated as “virtue.” In Greek, *aretê* means excellence, usually of a thing in performing its characteristic function as that particular sort of thing. For instance, if the function of a doctor as a doctor is healing people, then the *aretê* of a doctor as a doctor is healing people well. Likewise, if the function of a human as a human is to act in accordance with reason, then the *aretê* of a human as a human is to do this well.

Avicenna and Alfarabi reach essentially this conclusion from essentially the same premises. But to “act in accordance with reason” is ambiguous. It can mean either the purely intellectual activity of reasoning, or it can mean acting reasonably or, which is the same thing, virtuously in everyday life. That Aristotle has the former in mind might be inferred from book 10, chapter 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle says that *complete* happiness will consist in virtuous contemplative activity, or virtuous activity on the part of the soul which thinks and judges (*nous*). Yet in the middle of the function argument in book 1, Aristotle identifies *eudaimonia* with a life of action of the parts of the soul that have reason, either the part that has reason and thinks, or the part that obeys reason (1.7.1098a4–5), which, a few chapters later, we learn is the irrational part of the soul, i.e., the emotional and appetitive faculty. It is the obedience to reason of this irrational part of the soul that is involved in behaving reasonably or virtuously in everyday life (1.13.1103a1–10). Alfarabi and Avicenna are united in the belief that, as book 10, chapter 7 suggests, true happiness consists in virtuous contemplative activity, and in particular, in the activity of contemplating God. Drawing, perhaps, on a passage from book 6 of Aristotle’s *Eudemian Ethics* (*Eth. Eud.* 6.13.1249b9–23), each casts practical reason in the subordinate role of managing character in order to facilitate this activity. This assumption, combined with the notion from Plato’s *Phaedo* (*Phd.* 63a–69e) that this will be aided by the separation of the soul from the body in death, lead them to conclude that happiness should mainly be sought in the afterlife.

But the focus in the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is clearly on the much more down-to-earth matter of behaving reasonably in everyday life, or in exhibiting virtue of character, which Aristotle defines as follows: “Virtue [of character] is a disposition concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us, this being determined by reason and in the way in which the man of practical wisdom would determine it” (2.6.1106b36–1107a2). Aristotle defines choice (*proairesis*) as a “deliberate desire of things in our own power” (3.3.1113a9–11), or the desire we get after rationally deliberating on a course of action to undertake that course of action. So a disposition concerned with choice is a disposition governing the nature of these rational desires. The claim that this disposition lies in a mean refers to Aristotle’s famous doctrine of the mean, according to which virtues of character are characterized by mean states of actions and emotions (2.3.1104b13–14, 2.6.1106b16–17, 1106b24–25). That this mean is “relative to us” means that it is not a simple arithmetic mean but a mean relative to the particular circumstances of the agent. Temperance, for instance, consists in a mean in the desire for and consumption of food and drink. But what is a moderate amount of food and drink for a very large person would probably be excessive for the rest of us (*Eth. Nic.* 2.6.1106a36–b5). Mildness of temper consists in a mean in feeling anger. But what is a moderate amount of anger on one occasion might be excessive or deficient on another depending on the nature of the incitement (*Eth. Nic.* 4.5). Finally, the claim in the definition of virtue that the mean is determined by reason as the man of practical wisdom would determine it is an appeal to

reason (*logos*) and practical wisdom (*phronêsis*), which is the intellectual virtue consisting in an ability to spot the mean in action and emotion involved in virtues of character. The man of practical wisdom is appealed to because Aristotle thinks that we can best judge what the appropriate mean would be on an occasion by imagining what someone we recognize as a good judge of the matter, i.e., a man of practical wisdom, would do.

Eudaimonia and Wellbeing

At this point, it might strike one as misguided to take what Aristotle means by *eudaimonia* to be equivalent to what we would call happiness. And even if, allowing for the caveat that *eudaimonia* is not a subjective psychological state, we think of it more generally as wellbeing or human flourishing, it is not obvious yet why behaving virtuously or “in accordance with reason” should be to our benefit. Indeed, there were well-known arguments at the time of Aristotle why virtues such as justice were detrimental to those who had them. For instance, the character Thrasyachus in Plato’s *Republic* argues that justice is pursuing someone else’s advantage while injustice is pursuing one’s own (Plato, *Resp.* 343c–344c). To answer this concern, it is first of all important to note that Aristotle does not deny that things like pleasure are intrinsically good and have a place in the best human life (Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 1.7.1097b2–5). He emphasizes, rather, that behaving virtuously is an ineliminable and uniquely human part of this life. In other words, one must be good in order to be well.

To see why this should be so, consider what Aristotle says about self-love in *Nicomachean Ethics* book 9. In chapter 4, he says that while the virtuous person is in a state of internal harmony, the vicious person is not. The source of the virtuous person’s harmony is his rationality, and the fact that the irrational part of his soul obeys reason. Vicious people, on the other hand, “are at variance with themselves, and have appetites for some things and wishes for others” because while they know how they should behave, they are swayed by their passions to do otherwise (9.4.1166b7–8). Conscious of this, vicious people do not enjoy their own company, and seek out others to pass their time with as a distraction from reflecting about themselves and memories of their own misdeeds (1166b13–19). The virtuous person, by contrast, finds it pleasant to spend time with himself and is without regret, because he is the person he thinks he ought to be and in each case has done what he thinks he ought to do (1166a23–34). Thus, Aristotle’s answer to Thrasyachus is that committing injustice in the pursuit of one’s own advantage is self-defeating since it comes at the inescapable cost of becoming a bad person.

So according to Aristotle, *eudaimonia* affords the immediate benefit of being pleased with oneself. Alfarabi and Avicenna, without identifying *eudaimonia* with pleasure, also claim that it will be extremely pleasurable since it involves the rarified intellectual pleasure of contemplating God. Avicenna claims that pleasure is the awareness by a psychological faculty of its own perfection in its appropriate exercise, and pain is an awareness of a corresponding imperfection. Sensory pleasure, for instance, is an awareness by the sensory faculty of its own perfection in the form of healthy sensory activity. And since this is true of non-rational faculties, reasons Avicenna, it must also be true of rational faculties such as the one with which we contemplate. Avicenna argues that since the activity of contemplating God is more perfect, more multifarious, and more enduring than any sensory activity, it

must produce a pleasure that is more intense, more multifarious, and more enduring than any sensory activity could provide. Unfortunately, since our bodies and their associated needs impede and distract us from this activity, we will have to wait until the afterlife to experience these pleasures. In the meantime, we must extrapolate our conception of them just as a person who is deaf at birth must extrapolate to comprehend the beauty of music (Avicenna 2005, 348–352).

Aristotle's Ethical Naturalism

Aristotle's function argument can be seen as a form of ethical naturalism, insofar as it tries to derive ethical claims, such as a specification of the human *summum bonum*, from an objective concept of human nature. The key to this sort of naturalism is the notion of teleology. It is assumed that every species of living being has a characteristic, objectively observable mode of life, and the function of their psychological and physical faculties is the unimpeded expression of this mode of life. The fitness of these faculties for expressing this mode of life may be likened to health. Just as healthy physical faculties (e.g., a healthy respiratory system) allow for unimpeded characteristic human physical activity, healthy psychological faculties allow for unimpeded characteristic human psychological activity. Aristotle believes that we have both rational and irrational psychological faculties and he defines psychological health in terms of the unimpaired functioning of the rational faculty and the perfect obedience of the irrational faculty to the rational faculty. Of the rational faculties, one is practical and another is theoretical. The excellence or virtue of the practical rational faculty is called practical wisdom. The excellence or virtue of the irrational faculty in obeying the commands of the practical rational faculty is called virtue of character.

It has been pointed out that, in principle, systems of virtue ethics need not be naturalistic. One might base one's notion of virtue on something other than what is conducive to a characteristic unimpeded human mode of life. But given that a system has been set up in this way, there is a tight conceptual connection between the notion of virtue and the naturalism that this approach involves. That is, virtue and vice, and in general, good and bad, will be specified in terms of conduciveness to a characteristic human mode of life.

A number of modern virtue ethicists have followed Aristotle in his naturalism. Elizabeth Anscombe has proposed that assessments of justice and injustice derive from certain natural facts about human nature (Anscombe 1969). That is, since the characteristic human mode of life requires cooperation to achieve one's ends, and since keeping one's promises is the most effective way to achieve this, it is therefore good (just) to keep one's promises and bad (unjust) to break them. Here, the concepts of justice and injustice and good and bad are derived from their conduciveness to a particular mode of life. Philippa Foot has pointed out that, on this view, there is no gap between fact and value because moral valuations of justice and injustice are simply facts about a particular subject matter, viz., conduciveness to a characteristic human mode of life (Foot 2001, 24).

Aristotle, who was unaware of any evidence for the evolution of biological species, thought that animal species, including the human species, are eternally fixed in their characteristics. Some have objected that the fact of evolution seriously undermines any attempt to construct a virtue ethics on a stable conception of a human being. Foot, obviously

cognizant of this, insists that the sort of human goodness understood as conduciveness to an objectively observable human mode of life is relative to the human species at a particular time and in a particular natural habitat (Foot 2001, 29). And, moreover, it is only the relative stability of the most general features of a species that figure into these sorts of assessments. In any event, as long as we refrain from thinking of teleology in terms of an inner *nisus*, as Aristotle perhaps did, the concept of a function can be given an acceptable etiological interpretation. On this view, to say that practical reason and the virtues of character serve the function of promoting a certain mode of life in a community means that members of the community now have these things because, ancestrally, there was selection for having them and they conferred a fitness advantage by promoting this mode of life.

External Goods and the Sufficiency of Virtue for Happiness

We have seen that one of the consequences of Aristotle's function argument is that the possession of virtue is necessary for happiness. This position is shared by nearly all virtue ethicists, both ancient and modern, though not all for the same reasons. While Aristotle, for instance, thought that virtuous action partly constituted *eudaimonia*, Alfarabi thought that, since *eudaimonia* in his view consists entirely in a certain sort of contemplative activity, moral virtue can only have value insofar as it facilitates this activity (Alfarabi 2015, 63–64). The Epicureans also valued virtue only instrumentally, since they defined *eudaimonia* as the complete absence of pain, and saw virtue, and above all prudence, as a means to avoid pain. A similar concept of virtue may be seen in Plato's *Protagoras*, where virtue is described as an art of measuring pleasures and pains in order to determine which course of action will maximize one's pleasure and minimize one's pain (Plato, *Prt.* 357a–b). Here again, virtue is instrumentally necessary for happiness, or at any rate, a type of happiness favored by "the many," but more importantly it is cast as a type of skill or knowledge. In Plato's *Euthydemus*, the virtue wisdom is cast as a skill of using non-moral goods like health and wealth to produce happiness, and as the source of goodness in these non-moral goods because it is the only intrinsic good (*Euthyd.* 278e–282e). Once one has located all intrinsic good in virtue like this, it is a short step to the conclusion that virtue, thought of as wisdom, is not only necessary for *eudaimonia* but sufficient for it. And this is, in fact, the step that the Stoics took, using arguments very similar to the ones in the *Euthydemus* to argue that the only requirement for being *eudaimōn* is being virtuous (Diog. Laert. 7.102–3; 127).

We have seen that Aristotle considers non-moral goods like pleasure and honor to be intrinsically good, and thus chosen for their own sake as well as for the sake of *eudaimonia* (Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 1.7.1097b2–5). He says that major strokes of worldly good fortune can make a life more blessed, while major strokes of bad fortune can have the opposite effect. More importantly, Aristotle thinks that a certain amount of external or bodily goods are necessary for the exercise of the virtues. He says that the possession of friends, wealth, and political power are instrumentally necessary to undertake virtuous action (1.8.1099a33–b2). If we were virtuous but completely deprived of external resources by some major stroke of bad fortune, for instance, Aristotle thinks that we could be praised for our character, but we could not be congratulated for our *eudaimonia* (1.12.1101b21–27). No one, he says, counts such a person happy.

Now in arguing that virtue is sufficient for happiness, the Stoics did not deny that *eudaimonia* consists in activity. They agreed with Aristotle that a virtuous person who is not active is not happy. Where they disagreed was in the concept of virtuous action. Since, following Plato, they thought that virtue is a sort of knowledge, it follows that virtuous action can be entirely cognitive as well. The Stoic Cleanthes claimed that the virtuous person is always acting virtuously in this way (Diog. Laert. 7.128) and Cicero represents the Stoics claiming that the external consequences of virtuous action are merely “after-growths” of virtuous action proper (i.e., virtuous cognition). The Stoics took this so far as to suggest that, for instance, the activity of thinking about walking is as good as walking, where virtuous action is concerned (Seneca, *Ep.* 113.23). As long as one is conscious, then, one can be engaged in virtuous action.

This view is somewhat extreme, and, no doubt, some of its extremity can be attributed to the pressure the Stoics were under in their debates with Aristotle’s school, the Peripatetics. Still, an important issue is raised. Aristotle takes the commonsensical view that, if virtuous action constitutes *eudaimonia*, one needs to be engaged in a full range of virtuous activities beyond mere virtuous cognition. In order to be courageous, one must engage in dangerous actions, in order to be just, one must engage in just social interactions, in order to be generous, one must give something away, and since these are all activities that can be thwarted by external circumstances it is possible to have these virtues and not exercise them. Still, though, there is the worry that this might deny *eudaimonia* to some people who we would like to say are *eudaimōn*, but are not involved in a full range of virtuous activities, e.g., the scholar or philosopher who spends his life in contemplative activity and who Aristotle himself counts as completely happy in book 10, chapter 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. As we saw, Aquinas, Avicenna, and Alfarabi saw reason to favor this case as the real *summum bonum* and the only true happiness.

Another attraction of holding that virtue is sufficient for happiness is the consequence that as long as one has virtue, or as the Stoics put it, once one has mastered the skill of using non-moral goods like health and wealth to produce happiness, then one will be happy come what may. And the Stoics took this “come what may” quite literally, claiming that, so long as one is virtuous, one could be happy even if one were “blind, infirm, afflicted by dire disease, in exile, childless, destitute and tortured on the rack” (Cicero, *Fin.* 5.84). The Stoic Seneca even takes a macabre delight in pointing out that it may be useful and even pleasant “to be burned, wounded, slain, or bound in prison,” provided one is virtuous (Seneca, *Ep.* 71.23). Aristotle, though, thinks this goes too far, and in book 7, chapter 13 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* he says, “Those who say that the victim on the rack or the man who falls into great misfortunes is happy if he is good, are, whether they mean to or not, talking nonsense” (7.13.1153b19–21). Evidently, Aristotle is honoring his methodological statement toward the end of the first chapter of book 7 to the effect that our objective in theorizing about these things is to vindicate as many of the most important common beliefs as possible (7.1.1145b2–7). In Aristotle’s view, if the conclusions of an ethical theory offend common sense, there must be something very wrong with the premises that led to them.

Still, one might object that one is only entitled to invoke common sense as long as one is consistent, and there is no guarantee that one’s common-sense intuitions will be consistent. What I mean is that Aristotle does, and the Stoics do not, allow non-moral goods to partially constitute *eudaimonia*. And if this is the case, then moral and non-moral goods

must be commensurable. But if moral and non-moral goods are commensurable, and even if moral goods are, in general, of much greater weight than non-moral goods, then there will be some quantity of non-moral good or evil that will outweigh a moral good or evil. Being tortured is a common example. If pain is a bodily evil and non-moral goods and evils are commensurable with moral goods and evils, then there will be some amount of pain that it will be rational to avoid by committing a vicious act, like betraying one's country under torture. While Aristotle does not address this circumstance explicitly, he does valorize the brave person who willingly sacrifices his life for his country. And he is quite explicit that such a person does this in the full knowledge that he is forfeiting all of his worldly goods, and indeed, his entire future life for the sake of this one virtuous act (3.9.1117b7–15; 9.8.1169a18ff.). This, it seems, is inconsistent with the commensurability of moral and non-moral goods. Recognizing this inconsistency, Cicero opined that the Aristotelians of his time ought to concede that moral goods are incommensurably more valuable than non-moral goods, “stop their stuttering,” and “say openly and loudly that happy life will step down into the bull of Phalaris” (Cicero, *Tusc.* 5.75–76). (The bull of Phalaris was a hollow brazen bull in which Phalaris, the tyrant of Acragas from 570–544 BCE, burned the sculptor Perilaus.)

SEE ALSO: Introduction to World Literature of the Third Millennium BCE to 600 CE; The Ethical Turn

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Abstract: Aristotle, though not the first Greek virtue ethicist, was the first to establish virtue ethics as a distinct philosophical discipline. His exposition of the subject in his *Nicomachean Ethics* set the terms of subsequent debate in the European and Arabic traditions by proposing a set of plausible assumptions from which virtue ethics should proceed. His conception of human wellbeing and virtue as well as his brand of ethical naturalism were influential from antiquity through the Middle Ages and continue to be influential today.

Keywords: Alfarabi; Aquinas; Aristotle; Avicenna; *eudaimonia*; reason; stoicism; *summum bonum*; Virtue Ethics