

Aristotle On the Good and How It Can Be Achieved

In this essay I will be exploring Aristotle's conception of good and explaining what is really meant by it and what Aristotle suggests as necessary for achieving a good and flourishing life. Aristotle asserts that good is something that everything aims at and what is needed for a virtuous life.¹ Aristotle tries to find a way to describe what good really is and how a good life can be achieved in his book *Nicomachean Ethics* and continues addressing it in the *Politics*. I will be presenting Aristotle's views on these important questions that still keep philosophers occupied today, and will also put forward my own opinions and interpretations of Aristotle's theories. It will be necessary for me to address that I will be using the words eudaemonia and happiness as synonyms.

Aristotle sees good as the main goal of human activity. The good is the ultimate end which should be pursued for its own sake. Aristotle determines good as "that at which all things aim."² Be it our actions or attitudes, in the end, everything aims at good. That then implies that good is the highest virtue. Aristotle divides good into two varieties. Some things are good in themselves, such as intelligence and higher pleasures. Other things, such as lower pleasures, are good on account of these higher goods.³ This still doesn't give us a clear explanation on what good really is. What does Aristotle fundamentally mean by the good? He suggests that the ultimate good is something that is called eudaemonia. It is usually translated to happiness or human flourishing.⁴ But there are important clarifications to mention to fully understand the meaning of eudaemonia. To fully understand the word, I would argue, that one must become familiar with Aristotle's theories around eudaemonia, and how it can be achieved. I will be taking a closer look on what Aristotle means by eudaemonia in its meaning of happiness.

So, happiness is something that Aristotle would classify as something that is good in itself. All of the other virtues, we might choose also for the sake of themselves but also for the sake of happiness. Happiness is the only thing that is chosen only for its sake.⁵ Thus happiness can be considered as the most desirable thing of all and as the goal of *everything* else. Well, how can one be happy according to Aristotle? How to achieve this state of eudaemonia? There are numerous things, in Aristotle's opinion, that must be taken into consideration. One of the most important things is to understand the importance of habits instead of focusing on feelings and fleeting moments.⁶ The consistency in acting virtuously is what can lead to

¹ Aristotle, *Ethics*, ed. and trans. by John Warrington (London: Everyman's Library, 1963), p. 3.

² Aristotle, *Ethics*, p. 3.

³ Aristotle, *Ethics*, p. 10.

⁴ Nigel Warburton, *A Little History of Philosophy* (Cornwall: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 11.

⁵ Aristotle, *Ethics*, p. 12.

⁶ Nigel Warburton, *A Little History*, p. 11.

eudaemonia. The quote “One swallow doesn’t make a summer.”⁷ which is originally from Aristotle’s *Ethics*, really captures the essence of eudaemonia. Essentially, true happiness is not accomplished by a few moments of pleasure.⁸ We shouldn’t be aiming for pleasures, for they are not virtuous.

Aristotle suggests that there are two kinds of virtues; intellectual and moral. Intellectual virtues are something that can be taught but moral virtues need to be practised.⁹ Aristotle thus argues that none of the moral virtues, which are considered as superior to the intellectual virtues, exist in people by nature. To be morally virtuous, one must exercise these virtues. Essentially, habits make us good and these habits should, according to Aristotle, be practised from an early age.¹⁰

Then how can one practice good, how to increase the chances of achieving eudaemonia? Aristotle argues that it can be done by developing an adequate character¹¹ and by using practical wisdom, which is translated from the Greek word *Phronesis*. The correct way to do this is by following Aristotle’s doctrine of the golden mean. The golden mean is a theory in which virtues are the means between two extremes; deficiency and excess. To make the correct decisions and to form the correct attitudes, one must try to avoid extremes, both excessiveness and reservedness. Being brave is seen as virtuous, but cowardness and foolhardiness are not considered to be virtuous. Being truthful about your own accomplishments is virtuous, but bragging and underestimating are not.¹² The intermediate is what should be the aim of all activities. Although sometimes, depending on the situation, it is considered virtuous to act in a way that might be more excessive or deficient. That is how the mean is found.¹³ And this brings practical wisdom into the picture. Following Aristotle’s doctrine of the golden mean is the way to use practical wisdom in coherence with the virtues. Just like plants, humans, as animate creatures acquire nutrition and reproducing. Aristotle describes this as the nutritive soul. Just like animals, humans act in accordance to their hedonistic principles. Aristotle describes this as the sensible soul. What separates humans from plants and animals is that as wise creatures, humans strive towards knowledge and try to accomplish a reasonable good life, and achieve eudaemonia. This Aristotle describes as the rational soul.¹⁴ All people struggle with their desires. The difference between a moral and an amoral person is how good they are at controlling these desires. A constant self-control is the highest form of ethicalness.¹⁵

⁷ Nigel Warburton, *A Little History*, p. 9.

⁸ Nigel Warburton, *A Little History*, p. 9.

⁹ Aristotle, *Ethics*, p. 28.

¹⁰ Nigel Warburton, *A Little History*, p. 12.

¹¹ Nigel Warburton, *A Little History*, p. 12.

¹² Matti Häyry, *Ajatus 71*, ed. by Juha Räikkä (Helsinki: Suomen Filosofinen Yhdistys, 2015), p. 176.

¹³ Aristotle, *Ethics*, p. 42.

¹⁴ Matti Häyry, *Ajatus 71*, p. 175.

¹⁵ Matti Häyry, *Ajatus 71*, p. 178.

Aristotle divides people into four different categories based on their type of character. The four types of characters are the virtuous character, the continent character, the incontinent character, and the vicious character. The virtuous character will naturally do what the functional mind logically reasons. The continent character manages to fight his desires against the logical reasoning. The incontinent character surrenders to the desires even knowing what the logical reasons are.¹⁶ Aristotle argues that the type of character that you have is a result of your upbringing.¹⁷ I'd argue that, even if our childhood and the circumstances of our upbringing have a huge impact on our personality and the way we see the world, it is not the only factor, not the only thing that plays a part in forming our personality and our conceptions of virtues. And of course not the only thing that determines whether or not we decide to act according to those virtues.

Aristotle thinks that society plays a necessary part in achieving eudaemonia.¹⁸ Because we have the ability to communicate, i.e. have a common language and the fact that we feel pleasure and pain means that we must know the difference between good and evil, and just and unjust. Therefore, Aristotle argues, that we are meant to be living in a society with other political associates.¹⁹

What I like the most about Aristotle's theory is that it gives us a way to see the world in which virtues can be accessible for everyone, without having to necessarily make them universal. To open my idea a bit more, I will try to explain how I see the virtues as subjective and universal at the same time. For me, the virtues are universal, simply by existing everywhere. For example happiness, being a conception created by people or not, can be found everywhere in the world. And the same goes for virtues such as truthfulness and courageousness. These virtues can essentially be found in different cultures and societies. I see the virtues as subjective in the fact that you can act in countless different ways and still act, for example courageously. Even if eudaemonia is universal, the ways of achieving it can be different according to a situation. "Consequently the good is not some common element answering to one idea. -- We shall know better the goods that are good for us, and if we know them we shall lay hold on them."²⁰ I interpreted this as underlining the importance of practical wisdom and truly knowing how to act virtuously in all of the possible situations that can be imagined. I believe that to be truly a virtuous person, one must truly act virtuously from the bottom of one's heart and not just by following certain rules that have been placed in front of you. I like how Aristotle's theory is not too vague, but can also be put into all sorts of different situations. Aristotle gives us the tools to figure out how eudaemonia and a flourishing life can be reached. But in the end, we need to work towards eudaemonia ourselves.

¹⁶ Matti Häyry, *Ajatus 71*, ed. by Juha Räikkä (Helsinki: Suomen Filosofinen Yhdistys, 2015), p. 177.

¹⁷ Matti Häyry, *Ajatus 71*, ed. by Juha Räikkä (Helsinki: Suomen Filosofinen Yhdistys, 2015), p. 177.

¹⁸ Nigel Warburton, *A Little History of Philosophy* (Cornwall: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 13.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. by Ernest Barker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 7.

²⁰ Aristotle, *Ethics*, ed. and trans. by John Warrington (London: Everyman's Library, 1963), p. 10.

If only everyone did try to act virtuously and be a better version of themselves. This way the pressure of trying to, for example, save the world from a climate emergency would not be only on a few shoulders. If everyone did a little bit, tried their best, then some individuals wouldn't have to give it their all - or even beyond what they realistically can handle. But not everyone is trying to be a better version of themselves and are not trying to reach eudaemonia. And not everyone has practical wisdom, or at least don't seem to be using it very much. I believe that everyone is fundamentally capable of doing good and trying to be better. But, for countless reasons, that is not what the majority of people are doing. I would want to believe that all people are good enough to act in the best way possible, in a non-harmful way for other people. But that is unfortunately not the case. And to solve these differences in opinions on how to act there needs to be some ground rules for everyone, and deciding on those has certainly been a huge problem for humanity throughout history. Realising the importance of that is why I think the society is important, as did Aristotle.

I also believe that if everyone were to look after themselves primarily, they would have a greater chance of doing good to the society, to help the society. If one flourishes (has reached eudaemonia), they have a better capacity of helping other people. The cheesy sayings about you having to love yourself before you can love someone else, and that spreading love (or happiness) creates more love, fit very well with my thoughts on Aristotle's account on good.

There is this sense of balance throughout Aristotle's theories and ideas on the world which I really like. I believe that life is about trying to balance everything out and finding a way to reach the golden mean and eudaemonia. I think this goes well with the idea that sometimes you need to turn more to the excess or deficiency in order to, in the end, find the golden mean.