

History of Philosophy

14 Aristotle's Ethics

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Abstract:

In this lecture, Dr. Arthur Holmes explains **Aristotle's teleological ethics**, which identifies the "good" as **proper human functioning** in accordance with reason. This process involves cultivating **virtue**, described as a settled internal disposition or "habit of the heart" developed through repeated **deliberative choices**. Aristotle suggests that moral excellence is found in the **golden mean**, a rational balance between the extremes of excess and deficiency in our emotions and actions. The text further explores how this framework extends to **politics and art**, viewing the state as a social necessity for the common good and art as a way to represent universal truths. Ultimately, Holmes clarifies that while Aristotle focuses on **immanent forms** rather than Plato's transcendent ideals, he remains an ethical absolutist committed to **intrinsic goods**.

Briefing Document:

Aristotle's Ethics: A Briefing on Teleology, Virtue, and Social Order

Executive Summary

Aristotle's ethical framework is fundamentally teleological, grounded in the premise that all things possess a natural end (*telos*) and that the "good" is synonymous with "proper functioning." For human beings, this excellence (*arête*) is defined as a complete life lived in accordance with reason. Unlike systems based on rigid rules, Aristotelian ethics focuses on the development of virtuous dispositions through rational habituation. Key takeaways include:

- **Virtue as Function:** Virtue is not merely an outward act but an inner disposition and a "habit of the heart" that disposes an individual toward proper functioning.
- **The Doctrine of the Mean:** Moral excellence is achieved by using deliberation to find the balance between the extremes of excess and deficiency.

- **Habit and Choice:** Ethical character is built through repeated, rationally guided choices. One-off actions do not constitute a virtuous life; consistency is required.
 - **Social Nature:** Humans are naturally social beings (*zōon politikon*), meaning individual well-being is inextricably linked to the proper functioning of the community and the state.
 - **Catharsis in Art:** Aesthetic experiences serve a moral function by purging excessive emotions, thereby restoring the individual's capacity to live according to reason.
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The Teleological Foundation of Ethics

Aristotle's philosophy across all disciplines is teleological, meaning it is oriented toward the natural ends or proper functions of things. In ethics, this requires an analysis of the human soul and its specific capacities.

The Tripartite Soul

Aristotle distinguishes between three levels of soul-functions, each with its own "good" or proper functioning:

1. **The Vegetative Soul:** Governs nutritive and reproductive functions. Its end is physical health.
2. **The Animal Soul:** Governs sensitive and sensory functions, including consciousness, feelings, emotions, and appetites. Proper functioning here produces the **moral virtues**.
3. **The Rational Soul:** The distinguishing characteristic of the human species, involving thought, speech, and art. Proper functioning here produces the **intellectual virtues**.

Definition of the "Good"

The highest good is defined as a life that successfully actualizes essentially human potentials. Aristotle describes this as "a complete life in accordance with reason" and, by extension, "in accordance with virtue." Virtue, or *arête*, is simply the excellence of quality that allows a human to function as a human being should.

Virtue, Habituation, and the Will

Virtue involves both outward behavior and inner disposition—motivation, intention, and attitude. A virtuous person is "inner-directed," acting out of a settled disposition rather than merely responding to external stimuli.

The Process of Habit Formation

Character development is the result of habituation. Aristotle emphasizes that humans have the *capacity* for virtue, but it must be actualized through:

- **Deliberation:** Rational reflection on the ends (what constitutes good functioning) and the means to achieve them.
- **Choice:** Decisive action based on that deliberation.
- **Repetition:** A single virtuous act does not create a habit. As Aristotle famously noted, "one sparrow does not a summer make." Repeated thoughtful action eventually becomes a "habit of the heart" or an unconscious mental habit.

Moral Failure (*Akrasia*)

Aristotle acknowledges "weakness of will" (*akrasia*), where individuals lack the inner resolve to stick to their rational decisions. Those unable to rule themselves by reason—such as young children or those he deems "slaves by nature"—must be ruled by the reason of others through external discipline until proper functional habits are instilled.

The Doctrine of the Mean

The role of deliberation in the moral life is to identify the "mean" between extremes. Every personality trait or emotion can be expressed in excess or deficiency; virtue is the rational balance between them.

Virtue	Deficiency	Excess
Courage	Cowardice	Foolhardiness
Generosity	Miserliness / Stinginess	Profligacy

Temperance Insensibility (Too little feeling) Licentiousness (Too much feeling)

Finding the mean is not a matter of simple moderation but of feeling emotions and desires "at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way."

Happiness, Pleasure, and the Highest Good

Aristotle makes a sharp distinction between happiness (*eudaimonia*) and pleasure.

- **Happiness:** Defined as proper functioning and well-being. It is the end of a complete life.
- **Pleasure:** A temporary emotion or feeling. It is often contingent on external events and can be had toward "wrong things."

Aristotle argues that pleasure is not the end to be pursued but is a "by-product" or "fringe benefit" of fulfilling an activity correctly. It is a side effect of actualizing one's ends.

Social and Political Theory

Aristotle defines the human being as a "social being" (*zōon politikon*) by nature. This teleological view suggests that humans cannot function aright in isolation; interdependence is a requirement for the human good.

The Function of the State

The state is "the individual writ large" and should be rationally ordered for the **common good**. Unlike Plato, who proposed a single ideal republic ruled by philosopher-kings, Aristotle is open to alternative political constitutions. He recognizes that because forms exist within particulars, various types of government may be viable as long as they facilitate the proper functioning of society, family, and education.

Education

Because the goal is a complete life in accordance with reason, Aristotle advocates for a **liberal education** that touches all areas of life, preparing citizens for both practical and contemplative excellence.

The Role of the Arts

Aristotle views art as "representation" or "imitation of life," including characters and emotions. Unlike Plato, who feared that imitating emotions was corrupting, Aristotle argues that art has a scientific quality because it captures universals within particulars.

- **Poetry vs. History:** Aristotle considers poetry more "scientific" than history because history merely chronicles particulars, while poetry captures universal principles of human experience.

- **Catharsis:** The primary function of drama, particularly tragedy, is to produce a "purging" of emotions like fear and pity. By arousing and then releasing these emotions, the audience is "cleansed" and freed to return to a life governed by reason.
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Comparative Philosophical Context

Aristotle's ethics are often contrasted with both Platonism and modern Pragmatism.

- **Versus Platonism:** While Aristotle maintains a sense of "transcendent" excellence (the highest contemplation being the contemplation of God), his forms are imminent—existing within the world of particulars rather than in a separate heaven. He places greater emphasis on freedom of choice and the moral prerequisites for knowledge.
- **Versus Pragmatism:** Aristotle is not a pragmatist. While pragmatists like John Dewey see values as instrumental tools for short-term objectives, Aristotle believes in **intrinsic goods**. Proper human functioning is good in itself, not just as a means to an end.
- **Ethical Absolutism:** Aristotle is an ethical absolutist who believes in universal virtues. However, his is an "ethic of virtue" rather than an "ethic of rules." He provides absolute virtues to embody rather than a list of absolute rules to follow.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: Aristotle's Ethics

This study guide explores the teleological ethics of Aristotle as presented by Dr. Arthur Holmes. It examines the nature of the human soul, the development of virtue through habit, the importance of the rational mean, and the intersection of ethics with politics and the arts.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided text.

1. What is the central role of teleology in Aristotle's ethical system?
 2. How does Aristotle differentiate between the vegetative, animal, and rational souls?
 3. What does the Greek term *arête* signify regarding human virtue?
 4. How are moral dispositions or "habits of the heart" acquired?
 5. What is *akrasia*, and how does it relate to the need for external governance?
 6. Explain the "Golden Mean" in the context of moral virtues.
 7. How does Aristotle distinguish between the two types of intellectual virtues?
 8. Why does Aristotle argue that pleasure is not the highest good?
 9. What is the significance of the term *fousai* in Aristotle's political theory?
 10. What is the function of "catharsis" in Aristotelian drama?
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Part II: Answer Key

1. **Teleology and Ethics:** Aristotle's philosophy is teleological because it focuses on natural ends or "proper functioning." In ethics, this means identifying the specific functions of the human soul and determining that "the good" is a life lived in accordance with those functions and reason.
2. **The Three Souls:** The vegetative soul manages nutritive and reproductive functions, while the animal soul governs sensory functions, consciousness, and feelings. The rational soul is the distinguishing feature of the human species, responsible for thought, speech, and guided deliberation.
3. **Definition of Arête:** *Arête* is translated as virtue, but more broadly refers to excellence or quality. A virtuous person exhibits a "human quality" to life, functioning exactly as a human being should function in both outward behavior and inner disposition.
4. **Habit Formation:** Moral dispositions are developed through repeated decisions and choices that are rationally guided. By deliberating on means and ends and acting on

those thoughts consistently, an individual eventually transforms deliberate choices into unconscious mental habits.

5. **Akrasia and Control:** *Akrasia* refers to a weakness of will where an individual lacks the inner resolve to stick to a rational decision. Because these individuals cannot rule themselves by reason, Aristotle suggests they must be ruled by the reason of others, much like young children are disciplined.
6. **The Golden Mean:** Moral virtue is found by seeking a rational mean between the extremes of excess and deficiency. For example, courage is the mean between the deficiency of cowardice and the excess of foolhardiness, ensuring emotions are felt at the right time and in the right way.
7. **Intellectual Virtues:** Aristotle distinguishes between practical wisdom and contemplative wisdom. Practical wisdom involves the application of reason to daily life and actions, while contemplative wisdom involves theoretical thinking and the contemplation of universal principles or the divine.
8. **Pleasure as a By-product:** Pleasure cannot be the highest good because it is intermittent, contingent on external events, and varies in moral worth. Instead, Aristotle views pleasure as a "fringe benefit" or a side effect that arises from the fulfilling activity of actualizing one's proper ends.
9. **Fousai (By Nature):** Aristotle uses the term *fousai* to argue that humans are social beings "by nature." This teleological view suggests that human excellence cannot be achieved in isolation; the human good is only attainable through interdependence within a properly functioning society.
10. **Catharsis:** In drama, particularly tragedy, catharsis is the purging of emotions like fear and pity. By representing these emotions on stage, the drama allows the audience to release them, thereby cleansing the emotional life and freeing the individual to live more in accordance with reason.

Part III: Essay Format Questions

Instructions: Use the themes discussed in the source material to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Development of Character:** Analyze Aristotle's theory of moral development. In your response, address the roles of potentiality, rational deliberation, and the transition from conscious choice to settled habit.

2. **The Architecture of the Soul:** Detail the hierarchy of the soul's functions according to Aristotle. How does the "proper functioning" of each level contribute to his definition of the "complete life"?
3. **Aristotle vs. Plato on the State:** Compare Aristotle's view of the ideal state with that of Plato. Specifically, discuss their differing views on the "Forms" and how this led Aristotle to accept a variety of viable political constitutions.
4. **Art as Universal Representation:** Explore why Aristotle considers poetry to be more "scientific" than history. Discuss his view of art as an imitation of life and emotions rather than just an imitation of particulars.
5. **Ethics of Virtue vs. Ethics of Rules:** Using the text's discussion of pragmatism and absolutism, argue whether Aristotle's focus on "the mean" constitutes a relative or a universal moral framework.

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Akrasia	Weakness of will; the inability to act according to one's rational decisions due to a lack of self-discipline.
Animal Soul	The dimension of the soul responsible for sensory functions, consciousness, emotions, and appetites.
Arête	The Greek term for virtue, meaning excellence or the quality of functioning aright.
Catharsis	The purging or cleansing of emotions, specifically fear and pity, through the experience of representational art like tragedy.
Contemplative Wisdom	The highest intellectual virtue, involving theoretical thinking and the contemplation of universal truths and God.
Fousai	A Greek term meaning "by nature"; used to describe the essential social and societal nature of human beings.
Golden Mean	The rational balance between the extremes of excess and deficiency in emotions and actions.

Practical Wisdom	The intellectual virtue involving the use of reason to guide actions and moral decisions in everyday life.
Rational Soul	The highest level of the human soul, unique to the species, responsible for thought, speech, and deliberation.
Teleology	A philosophical framework where everything is understood in terms of its end (<i>telos</i>), purpose, or proper functioning.
Vegetative Soul	The most basic level of the soul, governing the fundamental biological functions of nutrition and reproduction.
Virtue	A settled disposition or "habit of the heart" that disposes an individual to proper internal and external functioning.