

Aristotle Lecturette



Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) was a philosopher who followed in the footsteps of Socrates and Plato (who are often referred to as the founding fathers of philosophy.) His thoughts and views are being revalued and his ideas of “virtue ethics” are becoming modernized in our 21st Century world. Thus, it will be helpful for you to have a “nutshell” view of his views on ethics.

“Aristotle's Ethics

Aristotle conceives of ethical theory as a field distinct from the theoretical sciences. Its methodology must match its subject matter—good action—and must respect the fact that in this field many generalizations hold only for the most part. We study ethics in order to improve our lives, and therefore its principal concern is the nature of human well-being. Aristotle follows Socrates and Plato in taking the virtues to be central to a well-lived life. Like Plato, he regards the ethical virtues (justice, courage, temperance and so on) as complex rational, emotional and social skills. But he rejects Plato's idea that a training in the sciences and metaphysics are a necessary prerequisite for a full understanding of our good. What we need, in order to live well, is a proper appreciation of the way in which such goods as friendship, pleasure, virtue, honor and wealth fit together as a whole. In order to apply that general understanding to particular cases, we must acquire, through proper upbringing and habits, the ability to see, on each occasion, which course of action is best supported by reasons. Therefore practical wisdom, as he conceives it, cannot be acquired solely by learning general rules. We also must also acquire, through practice, those deliberative, emotional, and social skills that enable us to put our general understanding of well-being into practice in ways that are suitable to each occasion.”

The above is from: Kraut, Richard. [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/)
Accessed at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/> Last updated 2005.

Virtue Ethics

Ethics was not merely a theoretical study for Aristotle. Unlike any intellectual capacity, virtues of character are dispositions to act in certain ways in response to similar situations, the habits of behaving in a certain way. Thus, good conduct arises from habits that in turn can

only be acquired by repeated action and correction, making ethics an intensely practical discipline.

Each of the virtues is a state of being that naturally seeks its mean ...relative to us. According to Aristotle, the virtuous habit of action is always an intermediate state between the opposed vices of excess and deficiency: too much and too little are always wrong; the right kind of action always lies in the mean. ([Nic. Ethics II 6](#)) Thus, for example:

- with respect to acting in the face of danger, **courage** is a mean between the excess of *rashness* and the deficiency of *cowardice*;
- with respect to the enjoyment of pleasures, **temperance** is a mean between the excess of *intemperance* and the deficiency of *insensibility*;
- with respect to spending money, **generosity** is a mean between the excess of *wastefulness* and the deficiency of *stinginess*;
- with respect to relations with strangers, **being friendly** is a mean between the excess of *being ingratiating* and the deficiency of *being surly*; and
- with respect to self-esteem, **magnanimity** is a mean between the excess of *vanity* and the deficiency of *utter humility*.

Notice that the application of this theory of virtue requires a great deal of flexibility: friendliness is closer to its excess than to its deficiency, while few human beings are naturally inclined to undervalue pleasure, so it is not unusual to overlook or ignore one of the extremes in each of these instances and simply to regard the virtue as the opposite of the other vice. Although the analysis may be complicated or awkward in some instances, the general plan of Aristotle's ethical doctrine is clear: avoid extremes of all sorts and seek moderation in all things. Not bad advice, surely. Some version of this general approach dominated Western culture for many centuries. The above is paraphrased (with permission) from:

Kemerling, Garth. <http://www.philosophypages.com/hy/2s.htm> Last updated October 2001.