

ARISTOTLE on Ethics

Practical science – science of conduct (subordinate to political science).

This science aims at changing how things are rather than merely knowing how things are. The aim of ethics is developing good habits and acting rightly.

Criteria of the Good life, of living well.

Based on Human nature and on general biological science.

Good actions and good living can only be based on opinions, not on knowledge. Circumstances and personalities are highly variable and complex. Yet some opinions are foolish and others are wise.

Aiming at realization of specific form.

Goal-state – finished condition; outcome of natural development in things of kind K= the good-for -a-K.

Arts, inquiries, deliberate actions also aim at some goal or completion.

What is the highest good for human beings?

All call it “happiness”. What is happiness? Different opinions are stated.

Aristotle: a thing is in a good condition when it is functioning according to its (natural) design. A thing’s design or form is an objective fact about it.

It is fairly easy to figure out the purpose for which some manufactured thing was made. For complex natural substances, the kinds of or functions that they accomplish best because of their design or form can be harder to discover.

Every creature has endowments from nature that enable it to seek find and use things which are to its benefit. These are parts or powers that facilitate its well-being; powers enabling it to avoid and deal with things which are harmful to it.

The Good for a living thing = the full realization and exercise of the powers inherent in its specific natural form. This is the state at which a substance aims. This condition is a kind of excellence or virtue.

The unique natural endowment of human beings by which they aim at their good is Reason – the ability to exercise foresight, to plan, govern, manage and control things over the course of life.

Specifically human natural powers = thinking and choosing.

Distinctively human excellence at which human beings naturally aim = rational activity.

Reason = two powers

1. of understanding (excellence = intellectual virtue; acquired through teaching)
2. of desiring and acting (excellence = moral virtue; acquired through formation of habits).

Excellent conditions are destroyed either by too much of something (excess) or by too little of something (deficiency). So, excellence is the condition which is the mean between excess and deficiency.

Moral virtue (excellence) – having engrained in your character dispositions to act according to the mean between excess and deficiency relative to person and circumstances.

Each moral virtue is an excellence of practical reason but requires the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom – knowing how to deliberate well about what is conducive to living well.

Excellence of character = being well-disposed in appetites and emotions; indulging them neither too much nor too little; observing a mean regarding them.

This means that the rightness of an action is something variable according to circumstances, person, etc. But this fact is compatible with the objective correctness of actions. (contrast the sophists.)

Human happiness = rational activity in accordance with virtue.

Virtue = a settled disposition of the mind in determining the choice of actions consisting in observance of the mean relative to us. This is choice determined by principle, i. e. as the prudent (practically wise) person would determine it.