

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

What you need to know:

'The good' for human beings: the meaning of Eudaimonia as the 'final end' and the relationship between Eudaimonia and pleasure.

The function argument and the relationship between virtues and function.

Aristotle's account of virtues and vices: virtues as character traits/dispositions; the role of education/habituation in the development of a moral character; the skill analogy; the importance of feelings; the doctrine of the mean and its application to particular virtues.

Moral responsibility: voluntary, involuntary and non-voluntary actions.

The relationship between virtues, actions and reasons and the role of practical reasoning/practical wisdom.

Issues including:

whether Aristotelian virtue ethics can give sufficiently clear guidance about how to act

clashing/competing virtues

the possibility of circularity involved in defining virtuous acts and virtuous persons in terms of each other

whether a trait must contribute to Eudaimonia in order to be a virtue; the relationship between the good for the individual and moral good.

'The good' for human beings

P1: everything we do is aimed at some good

P2: each good is also done for the sake of a higher good

P3: This cannot go on forever (otherwise our aim would be pointless)

C: there must be an ultimate good, which everything we do is aimed at.

For Aristotle, this ultimate good for which humans aspire is eudaimonia.

Key terms

Teleological: the idea that everything is directed toward a goal or a purpose

Eudaimonia: flourishing. It is the ultimate good or final end for all human beings. It is something we work hard to achieve and that it is developed through our actions.

Virtues: Positive character traits, such as courage, honesty, generosity.

Vices: Negative character traits, such as greed or selfishness. They develop when reason fails to shape our emotions and desires.

Habituation: the practice and training required to develop virtues, through use of reason

Possible Exam Questions

What is meant by the term 'eudaimonia'? (3 marks)

What did Aristotle mean by 'habituation'? (3 marks)

According to Aristotle, what is the relationship between eudaimonia and pleasure? (3 marks)

Outline the function argument. (5 marks)

Outline Aristotle's understanding of the role of education/habituation in the development of a moral character. (5 marks)

Outline the skill argument. (5 marks)

Outline the doctrine of the mean and its application to particular virtues. (5 marks)

Outline Aristotle's understanding of moral responsibility. (5 marks)

Explain the possibility of circularity involved in defining virtuous acts and virtuous persons. (5 marks)

To what extent is Aristotle's virtue ethics successful? (25 marks)

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

Eudaimonia as the 'final end'

The empirical approach:

Eudaimonia must be the 'final end' because everything else is flawed:

- Pleasure because this would make us just animals
- Wealth as this is just a means to an end
- Honour as this depends on other people's recognition
- Goodness as this is compatible with a life of suffering

Conceptual approach: the final end must be:

- An end, never a means to an end
- The 'most final' of final ends, for the sake of which everything is done
- Self-sufficient, so nothing could be added to it to make it even better
- The most desirable of all things

Eudaimonia meets all these criteria

The relationship between Eudaimonia and pleasure.

Pleasure is not the only thing we aim at

There are other things - such as knowing and being virtuous - which we do, as a matter of fact, seek out.

We seek out these things even if they bring us no pleasure.

The pleasure they bring us is not why we seek them.

Therefore they are final ends (in themselves) and not means to pleasure.

Therefore pleasure cannot be the only good.

The role of education/habitation in the development of a moral character

- Virtue is not innate: we are not born with it.
- Humans have the potential to develop virtues over time: by learning them through commitment, practice and habit.
- The use of reason is needed to develop the virtues

The function argument and the relationship between virtues and function.

P1: Every type of person has a function in society and every part of the body has a function

P2: Therefore, human beings must also have a function

P3: Our function cannot be growth/nutrition (shared with plants) or sentience (shared with animals) as these are not distinctive to human beings

C1: Our function is to live guided by reason.

P4: X is good if it fulfills its function well

P5: X fulfills its function well if it has the right qualities (virtues)

P6: Therefore, a good human is someone with the right qualities (virtues) which enable them to live guided well by reason

C2: Eudaimonia is reached by someone with the right virtues which enable them to be guided well by reason.

The skill analogy

- Aristotle compared developing a virtue to developing a skill.
- We are not born with a skill to play a musical instrument (e.g. a harp)
- We have the capacity to learn that skill
- We only learn the harp by first playing the harp

- Equally:
- We are not born with virtues (e.g. bravery)
- We have the capacity to learn the virtues
- We only learn virtues, such as bravery, by first performing brave acts

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

The importance of feelings

Aristotle gives a central place to feelings in his moral theory. All our actions are a display of an emotion: desire, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, hatred, longing, pity

Virtue means expressing the appropriate amount of these feelings: neither too much nor too little, but in the 'mean'. A virtuous person has no inner conflict: they don't have to overcome their feelings in order to do the right thing

The doctrine of the mean

Virtue lies between displaying 'too much' and 'too little' of a particular feeling - this is the doctrine of the mean. For example, displaying too much fear is cowardly; displaying too little fear is rash. Reason helps us display the right amount of fear, which is to act courageously.

Moral responsibility: voluntary, involuntary and non-voluntary actions.

Aristotle distinguishes between three different types of actions:

Voluntary actions

- Those that are fully intended
- The origin comes from within us.

Involuntary actions

- Acts done under compulsion (e.g. giving money to a burglar who is holding a gun to your head.)

Non-voluntary actions

- Acts done from ignorance (e.g. buying a guitar online only to find out it was stolen).

Aristotle believed you were responsible for voluntary actions and you could not be held responsible for involuntary actions. If there is regret after non-voluntary actions and we wish we had acted differently, then the action was contrary to our intention. We would still be responsible but we could be forgiven and pardoned. If there is no regret and we would not have acted differently, then we should be judged and held fully responsible as if this were a voluntary action.

Issues with Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

1. Whether Aristotelian virtue ethics can give sufficiently clear guidance about how to act

Aristotle's ethics has no such clear rules about how to behave (unlike Mill or Kant)

2. clashing/competing virtues

Someone who you love has a painful terminal illness and pleads with you to end their life. The virtue of charity motivates you to help them towards euthanasia, the virtue of justice forbids you from killing them. Aristotle had a hierarchy of virtues with justice above charity.

3. whether a trait must contribute to Eudaimonia in order to be a virtue
In some horrific situations, following vices might be the right thing to do (in concentration camps, theft, dishonesty and bribery were routinely the right thing to do) So, traits can be virtues, but do not lead to eudaimonia.

4. the possibility of circularity

The definition contains the term being defined:

A virtuous act is an act done by a virtuous person

A virtuous person is someone who habitually performs virtuous acts

Therefore, a virtuous act is an act done by someone who habitually performs virtuous acts.

This circular definition does nothing to help explain the nature of virtuous acts or people.

5. the relationship between the good for the individual and moral good.

Ethics is meant to be about helping others. Aristotle has told us how we can achieve eudaimonia for ourselves! He hasn't said much about others. Some of Aristotle's virtues benefit only the individuals possessing them, e.g. ambition, pride, being aristocratic.