

**ETHICS AND SOCIETY: ARISTOTELIAN ETHICS**  
**PHILOSOPHY 150: HANDOUT 6**

***Aristotelian Ethics: Part I—Goals and Goods***

1. Goods are associated with (or equivalent to) the goals or aims of particular activities. This is a *teleological* conception of goods.
2. **The** good is associated with **the** goal. That is, the ultimate good for human beings is associated with the ultimate goal for human beings.
3. The ultimate goal for human beings must be
  - a. intrinsically desirable, that is, desirable for its own sake, and
  - b. ultimate, that is, the goal toward which each and every action is aimed.
4. The goal that meets these criteria is *eudaimonia* (happiness, or total well-being). Therefore, *eudaimonia* is the ultimate goal for human beings.

***Aristotelian Ethics: Part II—Function, Goals and Goods***

5. We can achieve goals by functioning in some way or ways, and by functioning *well* in those ways.
6. Likewise, we can achieve the ultimate goal of human beings, according to Aristotle, only by performing a certain function and performing it well.
7. But which function is it that we must perform in order to achieve *eudaimonia*? Aristotle claims that we must perform the *proper* function of human beings, which is a function that's
  - a. unique to human beings and
  - b. distinctive of human beings.
8. He argues that the function that meets these criteria is *reason*, and that when we are reasoning well, we will achieve the ultimate goal of—and the ultimate good for—human beings, namely, *eudaimonia*.
  - a. Developing the ability to reason well takes time, practice and instruction.
  - b. The ability to reason well is something steady or secure.
9. As we learn to reason well, we learn to decide to act as we should—that is, we learn to be virtuous. And when we reason well, we *do* act as we should—that is, we *are* virtuous. So someone who reasons well achieves the ultimate goal of human beings, namely, *eudaimonia*. And since someone who reasons well is virtuous, it follows that *those who achieve eudaimonia are virtuous people*.

### ***Aristotelian Ethics: Part III—What is a virtuous person?***

10. But what is a virtuous person? There are two basic components. A virtuous person
- a. performs the right actions, and
  - b. performs them in the right way.

#### 11. Performing *the right actions*

The *right* actions are those which represent the mean between excess—having too much—and deficiency—having too little.

The mean that is constitutive of certain virtues—for example, courage, temperance and liberality—will be different for *different* people in the *same* situations and different for the *same* people in *different* situations. This is one important reason why the virtuous person is one who has the ability to reason well—she can fairly reliably determine, in each situation she’s in, what the mean is for her in that situation.

#### 12. Performing the right actions *in the right way*

This involves three conditions:

- (a) The agent must know what she is doing.
- (b) She must want to do what she is doing. (And it might even be that she must want to do it for the right reasons.)
- (c) Her act “must proceed from a fixed and unchangeable disposition.” This is where habit, instruction and practice come into play.

When these three conditions are met, then we can say that an agent is performing the actions she performs *in the right way*.

13. Thus, Aristotle defines virtue as “a disposition of the soul in which, when it has to choose among actions and feelings, it observes the mean relative to us, this being determined by such a rule or principle as would take shape in the mind of a man of sense or practical wisdom.”

#### 14. *Aristotle’s virtue ethics*

An act is right just in case it’s the sort of action that a virtuous person would perform.

*or*

An act is right just in case it’s the sort of action that (a) represents a mean between the extremes of excess and deficiency, and that (b) is performed in the right way.