

Aristotle – How to live a good life

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2400 years ago Aristotle found out how to be **happy**.

His *Nicomachean Ethics* is an operating manual for a **good life**:

What is good?

First of all, what makes a thing a **good** thing? A good thing **fulfils** its **unique function**.

A **good knife** is a knife that is good at **cutting**.



A **good eye** is an eye that is good at **seeing**.



Now, what makes a **good human**? To know what a human should be good at, we need to look at **what is unique** about humans: We have a **soul** that **thinks** and **feels**.



So for us to live a **good life** means to have an **excellent soul**. And this excellence reveals itself in a **clear intellect** and a **noble character**.



Let's have a closer look at both and how we can achieve them:

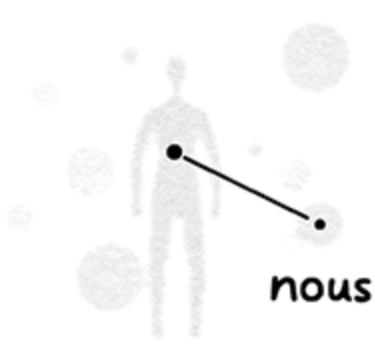
1. The virtues of a clear intellect

Today, we often reduce all our mental abilities to "intelligence". Aristotle went a bit deeper and identified multiple **theoretical virtues**:

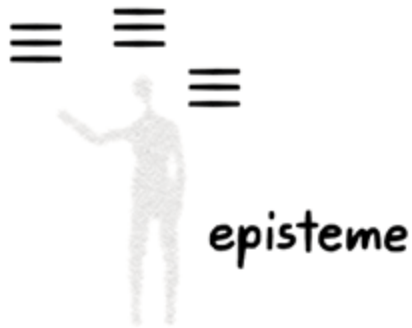
Art (techne) is the ability to **make things**.



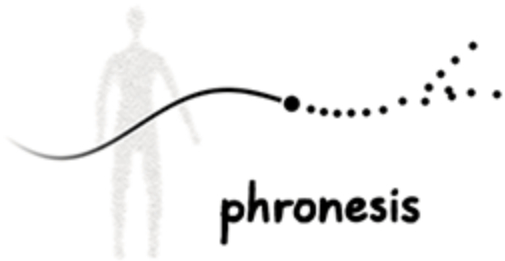
Intelligence (nous) is **intuitive insight** into underlying truths of our world.



Scientific knowledge (episteme) is our **logical reasoning** about the world.



Prudence (phronesis) is our ability to make **practical (moral) decisions**.



Wisdom (sophia) is a comprehensive **understanding of deeper truths**.



These theoretical virtues help us understand what is **true** and **possible**.

And as important as they are, for Aristotle something else is just as vital for a good life: **our character**.

2. The virtues of a noble character

A **good character** can **handle emotions** properly.

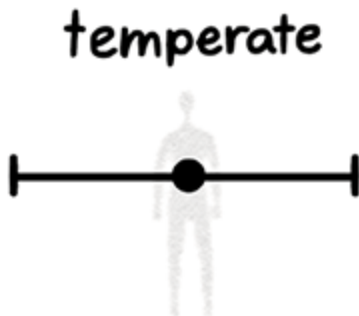


We do that by finding the **right mean** between **two extremes**:

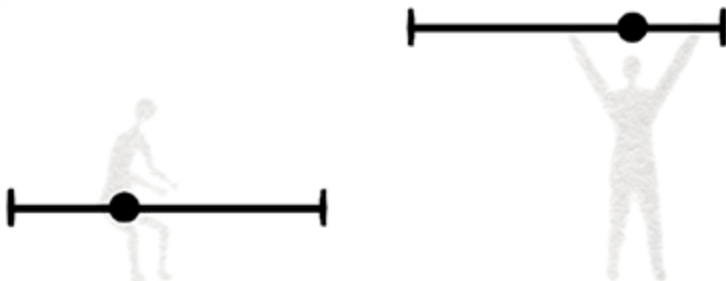
Courage is the right mean between cowardice and recklessness.



Temperance is the right mean between gluttony and abstinence.



This right mean depends on the **person**.



An athlete might need more food than an office worker.

It also depends on the **situation**.

Sometimes it is better to avoid conflict, at other times it is worth it to stand our ground.

We cannot study rules for proper behaviour. Instead, **we must train our character** through **habituation** to find the right mean appropriate to the circumstances.

Action!

In a **successful life**, the human soul fulfils its purpose through **virtuous actions**.

Are we born with those virtues?

No. Aristotle says that humans have a **capacity** to be good, but it is up to us to develop our character. This is best achieved through **study** and **habit**.

Excellence is not something you are, but something you **do!**

A good life...

For Aristotle happiness is achieved through a lifetime of **virtuous activity** of the soul, involving both **intellect** and **character**.

So far so good, you might say—but isn't happiness about **feeling good**?

... is a happy life

Aristotle does not deny that pleasure is fun. Money, fame and food are great and contribute to our happiness!

But these things are **not** essential to a good life.

One might even suffer greatly and still live a virtuous—that is: a good—life. When Aristotle speaks of a “happy” life, he means a **fulfilled** or **flourishing** life rather than a pleasurable one.

Such a virtuous life helps us find our place in the world. It is good simply because it suits our nature. Everything we do should ultimately serve the best we can be: a human soul with a clear intellect and a noble character.

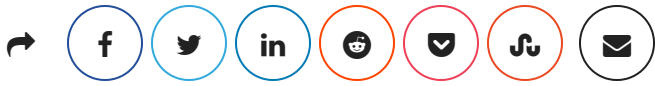
Happiness is not a feeling of pleasure. **Happiness is the pursuit of excellence.**

If you want to dig deeper

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

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