

character building aristotle

Aristotle's Enduring Blueprint for Character Building

character building aristotle offers a profound and timeless framework for cultivating a virtuous life. Far from being an abstract philosophical pursuit, Aristotle's approach to ethics, particularly as detailed in his seminal work "Nicomachean Ethics," provides a practical guide for developing excellence in character. This article delves into the core tenets of Aristotelian virtue ethics, exploring the nature of virtue, the role of habituation, the importance of the golden mean, and the concept of eudaimonia—human flourishing. Understanding these principles is crucial for anyone seeking to build a robust and morally sound character, demonstrating the enduring relevance of ancient wisdom in contemporary life.

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The Nature of Virtue: Excellence of Character

Aristotle conceived of virtue as a disposition of character, an ingrained tendency to act in accordance with reason and to feel emotions appropriately. It is not merely a state of mind or a passive quality, but an active excellence that is developed through consistent practice. For Aristotle, virtue is what makes a person good and enables them to perform their function well. Just as a good knife is sharp and cuts well, a good person possesses excellent character and lives well. This excellence is cultivated over time, transforming raw potential into a stable and reliable quality.

He distinguished between two types of virtues: intellectual virtues and moral virtues. Intellectual virtues, such as wisdom and understanding, are acquired through teaching and learning. Moral virtues, on the other hand, are developed through habituation and practice. These moral virtues are the focus of much of his ethical discussion, as they are directly concerned with our actions and our interactions with others. They represent the excellent functioning of our character in the realm of practical life.

Habituation: The Path to Virtuous Action

A cornerstone of Aristotelian character building is the principle of habituation. Aristotle famously stated that we become virtuous by doing virtuous acts. This means that virtues are not innate; they

are acquired through repeated practice, much like a skill such as playing a musical instrument or mastering a craft. One does not become courageous by contemplating courage, but by acting courageously in various situations until courage becomes a natural response.

The process of habituation involves a gradual shaping of our desires and actions. Initially, we might perform virtuous acts out of obligation or even with some discomfort. However, through consistent effort and conscious choice, these actions become easier and more natural. The aim is to reach a point where virtuous behavior is not a struggle but an integrated part of one's personality, driven by genuine inclination rather than external compulsion. This is how character is forged—one action at a time, building a lasting disposition.

The Golden Mean: Finding Balance in Conduct

Central to Aristotle's understanding of moral virtue is the concept of the "golden mean." He argued that virtue lies in an intermediate state between two extremes, one of excess and one of deficiency. For example, courage is the mean between the excess of rashness and the deficiency of cowardice. Generosity is the mean between extravagance and stinginess. These extremes are vices, and virtue is the path of moderation.

Identifying the golden mean is not a simple mathematical calculation. It is a matter of practical wisdom and context-dependent judgment. What constitutes the mean varies from person to person and situation to situation. For instance, the appropriate level of anger in response to an injustice might differ for a soldier on the battlefield compared to a scholar in a library. The virtue of the mean is about finding the right amount, at the right time, in the right way, and for the right reasons. This nuanced understanding emphasizes that virtue is not about rigidity but about skillful navigation of life's complexities.

Eudaimonia: The Flourishing Life as the Ultimate Goal

The ultimate aim of character building, according to Aristotle, is to achieve eudaimonia, often translated as "flourishing," "living well," or "human flourishing." This is not a fleeting feeling of happiness or pleasure, but a state of living a good life, characterized by excellent activity in accordance with virtue. Eudaimonia is the highest human good, the end towards which all our actions ultimately aim.

For Aristotle, eudaimonia is achieved through the consistent exercise of our distinctively human capacities, particularly our rational faculties, in accordance with virtue. It involves living a life of purpose and excellence, engaging in meaningful activities, and developing one's full potential. It is a lifelong pursuit, not a destination easily reached, and it requires not only internal virtue but also some external goods, such as health, friends, and a certain degree of prosperity, to facilitate virtuous activity.

Intellectual Virtues vs. Moral Virtues

Aristotle clearly demarcated intellectual virtues from moral virtues, recognizing their distinct origins and functions in character development. Intellectual virtues, such as scientific knowledge (episteme), art or craft (techne), intuitive reason (nous), practical wisdom (phronesis), and theoretical wisdom (sophia), are cultivated through instruction and study. They enable us to understand, reason, and make sound judgments about various aspects of the world and our actions.

Moral virtues, conversely, are developed through habit. These include virtues like courage, temperance, justice, generosity, and truthfulness. They are dispositions that guide our emotions and actions, ensuring they align with reason and the golden mean. While distinct, these two categories of virtues are deeply interconnected. Intellectual virtues, particularly practical wisdom, are essential for discerning the right course of action, which then guides the development and expression of moral virtues.

The Role of Reason in Character Development

Reason plays a pivotal role in Aristotelian character building. It is the faculty that distinguishes humans from other animals and is the basis for developing both intellectual and moral virtues. Reason allows us to deliberate about what is good, to understand the principles of virtuous conduct, and to guide our impulses and desires toward their appropriate expression. Without reason, our actions would be driven by unbridled emotions or mere instinct, leading away from virtuous living.

Aristotle believed that the ultimate goal of human life, eudaimonia, is achieved through the "activity of the soul in accordance with virtue." This emphasizes the active role of reason in directing our lives towards excellence. Reason helps us to identify the golden mean in any given situation, to assess the consequences of our actions, and to cultivate the appropriate emotional responses. It is the guiding principle that shapes our character and directs us towards a flourishing existence.

Practical Wisdom (Phronesis) and Ethical Decision-Making

Practical wisdom, or phronesis, is a crucial intellectual virtue that underpins the development and application of moral virtues. It is the ability to deliberate well about what is good and advantageous for oneself and for living a good life in general. Phronesis is not theoretical knowledge; it is a practical ability to discern the best course of action in specific, contingent circumstances. It allows us to understand what virtue requires in a particular situation.

Someone with phronesis can see the relevant features of a situation, understand the potential outcomes of different actions, and choose the path that aligns with virtue. This involves understanding the nuances of human interaction, the complexities of social life, and the appropriate application of moral principles. Phronesis is therefore indispensable for truly embodying moral virtues, as it provides the intelligence needed to act virtuously in the messy reality of everyday life.

The Connection Between Virtue and Happiness

For Aristotle, virtue and happiness are not separate pursuits but are intrinsically linked. As mentioned, the ultimate aim of life is eudaimonia, which is understood as living well and flourishing, and this flourishing is achieved through virtuous activity. Therefore, living a virtuous life is not a means to happiness; it is the very essence of happiness or a good life.

He argued that the person who possesses and practices virtues consistently will naturally experience a profound and stable sense of well-being and fulfillment. This is because virtues align our internal states and external actions with reason and with the good, leading to a harmonious and well-ordered life. The pursuit of virtue, therefore, is the most direct and reliable path to achieving a truly happy and meaningful existence, as defined by the standards of human flourishing.

Frequently Asked Questions about Character Building Aristotle

Q: What is the primary goal of character building according to Aristotle?

A: The primary goal of character building according to Aristotle is to achieve eudaimonia, which translates to human flourishing, living well, or a life of fulfillment. This state is realized through the consistent exercise of virtues.

Q: How does Aristotle suggest one acquires virtues?

A: Aristotle posits that moral virtues are acquired through habituation, meaning by repeatedly performing virtuous actions. He famously states, "we become just by doing just acts, and temperate by doing temperate acts."

Q: Can you explain the concept of the "golden mean" in Aristotelian ethics?

A: The golden mean is the Aristotelian idea that virtue lies in an intermediate state between two extremes, one of excess and one of deficiency. For example, courage is the mean between rashness (excess) and cowardice (deficiency).

Q: What is the difference between intellectual and moral virtues in Aristotle's philosophy?

A: Intellectual virtues, such as wisdom and understanding, are acquired through teaching and learning. Moral virtues, such as courage and temperance, are developed through habit and practice.

Q: What role does reason play in Aristotelian character development?

A: Reason is central to Aristotelian character development. It is the faculty that allows us to understand what is good, to deliberate about our actions, and to guide our emotions and impulses towards virtuous conduct.

Q: Is practical wisdom (phronesis) considered a moral or intellectual virtue by Aristotle?

A: Practical wisdom (phronesis) is considered an intellectual virtue by Aristotle. It is the ability to deliberate well about what is good and advantageous for living a flourishing life, and it is essential for the application of moral virtues.

Q: Does Aristotle believe that external goods are necessary for a virtuous life and eudaimonia?

A: Aristotle acknowledges that while virtue is the primary component of eudaimonia, certain external goods such as health, friends, and a reasonable level of prosperity can facilitate virtuous activity and contribute to a flourishing life.

Q: How does Aristotle view the relationship between virtue and happiness?

A: Aristotle views virtue and happiness (eudaimonia) as inextricably linked. He argues that living a virtuous life is not merely a means to happiness, but rather the very definition of happiness or a life well-lived.

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