

# The Importance of Deliberation for Happiness in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics

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**Abstract.** Recent approaches to the study of happiness often base their research on Aristotle's ethics, particularly his Nicomachean Ethics, a seminal work on the concept of the highest good, or happiness, which remains central to contemporary society. Many investigations emphasize living a virtuous life by following the principle of the Golden Mean. This research focuses on Aristotle's concept of deliberation, examining its significance in achieving a happy life. We explored the definitions and interpretations of Aristotle's two types of virtues—moral and intellectual—through recent scholarship to better categorize and define deliberation. Our findings suggest that deliberation precedes the actions required to live in accordance with virtue, indicating its central role in attaining happiness. Further psychological and philosophical research, building on this conclusion, could confirm the importance of deliberation and contribute to broader studies in the field.

**Keywords.** Deliberation, Choice, Virtue, Happiness, Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics.

## 1. Introduction

The opening lines of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics state that all human activities aim at some Good. This marks the beginning of one of the earliest studies on happiness, known in Greek as *eudaimonia*—a concept that represents human flourishing and is achieved through virtue and excellence in the pursuit of the highest Good, or true happiness. [1].

Since then, happiness has remained a central concern for philosophers, yet a conclusive definition of happiness has still not been successfully established.

In contemporary history, one of the primary approaches among psychologists and philosophers to assess happiness is by measuring life satisfaction, often referred to as Whole Life Satisfaction (WLS). However, the interpretation of WLS varies depending on the definition of happiness used in the investigation [2]. This raises a critical question: Can we thoughtfully consider what will truly improve our lives and deliberate on them?

Positive Psychology, pioneered by Martin Seligman in 1996, revitalized and expanded upon Aristotle's ideas of happiness. By placing the study of virtues at its core, this field emphasizes the cultivation of personal strengths as essential to achieving lasting well-being and happiness.[3]

Those approaches have generated considerable recent research interest in happiness as well as the need to address the proposed in this article, concentrating on Aristotle's perspective, which examines the highest Good as determined by our actions. For this paper, wherever we read happiness, we refer to the highest Good, the eudaimonic approach for a good life.

To live a happy life, according to Aristotle, one must be virtuous. Most commonly, research studies focus on investigating virtue as the golden mean between two extremes of a trait or passion.

Our hypothesis is that the deliberation must precede both the acquisition of the knowledge necessary for developing virtues and the practice of those virtues to achieve excellence, which the Greeks called *areté*.

In this sense, deliberation would be the key element in pursuing, discovering, and living according to the golden mean—a central principle in moral virtue, and to make the choices that will result in a perception of a happy life, regardless of the psychological approach, because it relates to the perception of well-being and life satisfaction.

The aim of this article is to define deliberation within the framework of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics and explore its interpretations in recent literature. To do

so, we will first, examine the concept of virtue, as it is fundamental to happiness, whether in Aristotle's philosophy or in the Positive Psychology approaches.

This understanding will enable us to draw a preliminary conclusion about the role of deliberation in achieving happiness and offer a foundation for further investigation, contributing to future philosophical and psychological studies in this field.

## 2. What is Virtue?

Aristotle defines virtue as an activity of the soul, much like happiness, though he makes an important distinction: 'virtue is praiseworthy, but happiness is above praise' [4], establishing a hierarchy between the two. To grasp this, it's necessary to understand Aristotle's view of the soul, divided in two parts, rational and irrational, which he sees as composed of faculties, passions, and states of character.

As an activity linked to the state of character within the soul, virtue is attained through human effort and is therefore accessible to anyone. It can be acquired through learning or practice. Additionally, the act of learning and practice is closely tied to the intellectual virtue, which plays a role in guiding deliberation [5].

The intellectual virtue separates the human capacity of rationality from the irrational animals since it belongs entirely to the rational part of the soul. By focusing the interest on practical wisdom, in the intellectual virtue, Aristotle highlights the importance of excellent deliberation, making possible to consider what is good, what is bad for us in the highest level, making the intellectual virtue necessary to put in practice what the moral virtue provides through the assessment of the right values. [6]

This internal conflict originates from the dual nature of the soul - a rational and an irrational part. Within the irrational part, he identifies elements that are either exclusive to it or shared with the rational part.

The purely irrational elements are those we share with plants and animals, such as the functions responsible for nutrition and growth. Meanwhile, the elements shared by both the rational and irrational parts of the soul are related to appetite and desire, which can generate impulses that often conflict with the rational principles guiding our actions.

Virtue is a state of character that achieves a balance between excess and deficiency, guided by practical wisdom. The Principle of Golden Mean is the middle ground between these two extremes of excess and deficiency [7]. It is distinguished into two types: virtues related to moral character and those concerning the intellect.

Philosophical, practical wisdom and the capacity of good temperance are interconnected, as it is not enough to simply know what is right - one must also practice it.

## 2.1 Moral Virtue

Moral virtue is acquired through repetition and the formation of habits. This idea is reflected in the Greek word *ethike*, which comes from *ethos*, meaning habit or custom. For Aristotle, virtues are not innate but are developed over time through consistent practice, becoming second nature through habitual action.

Aristotle compares the development of moral virtue to learning the arts, something that we must acquire through practice. We cannot learn to play the guitar merely by watching video lessons. The same applies to other arts like acting, painting, or building. Moral virtues, **Tab. 1** - similarly, are learned by practicing them.

**Tab. 1** – Moral Virtues

| Excess          | Virtue          | Deficiency        |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Rashness        | Courage         | Cowardice         |
| Self-Indulgence | Temperance      | Insensibility     |
| Wastefulness    | Generosity      | Stinginess        |
| Vulgarity       | Magnificence    | Pettiness         |
| Vanity          | Magnanimity     | Pusillanimity     |
| Over-Ambition   | Proper Ambition | Lack of Ambition  |
| Irascibility    | Patience        | Lack of Spirit    |
| Boastfulness    | Truthfulness    | Understatement    |
| Buffoonery      | Wittiness       | Boorishness       |
| Obsequiousness  | Friendliness    | Quarrelsomeness   |
| Shamelessness   | Shame           | Excessive Shyness |
| N/A             | Justice         | N/A               |

Moral virtue is generally understood as a disposition to know what the right thing is, combining the capacity for judgment to find the Golden Mean with the action of doing what is right. It is closely tied to deliberation. However, this definition is incomplete. The choice must also be made for the right reasons, not merely out of habit or for external rewards. But what exactly is the definition of moral virtue?

The following definition has been proposed as comprehensive and final by Angioni [8], after considering all elements listed above: "(i) a disposition to act well, (ii) by deliberate choice, (iii) in accordance with the mean, but a mean that is defined not only, (iv) at the still general and vague level of the conclusions of deliberation, but (v) fully determined in light of the relevant singular factors" (translated by the author).

## 2.2 Intellectual Virtue

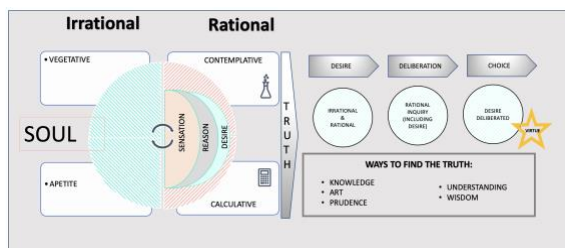
Deliberation is an essential element under the intellect, divided in two parts by Aristotle: the contemplative and the calculative, both located in the rational part of the soul.

The contemplative side, also called scientific, represents the invariable things. This part can be interpreted as a part that plays the most important role in happiness [9].

The calculative side represents the things that are variable, and though possible to deliberate. Aristotle makes it clear that we do not deliberate on those

things that are invariable.

The origin of action, which in Aristotle metaphysics is the efficient cause, is choice, driven by sensation, reason and desire - **Fig. 1**. In this sense, “choice cannot exist either without reason and intellect or without a moral state” [10].



**Fig. 1** - Intellectual Virtue

The intellectual virtue is responsible for the action that has the function of finding the truth.

There are some ways we can find the truth: scientific knowledge; art, the knowledge of how to make things; practical, intuitive, and philosophical wisdom. Those are the tools that will drive our good deliberation, aiming correctness, understanding and good judgement.

The question arises: if the contemplative aspect of intellectual virtue plays the most important role in happiness, what is the significance of deliberation, given that it pertains to the calculative part of the soul?

### 3. Deliberation

We might be tempted to consider choice and deliberation as the same when addressing our question about happiness. However, there are significant differences in Aristotelian ethics that we must highlight to properly define the present scope.

Deliberation is the process of rational inquiry, where we weigh different options, consider possible means to an end, and reason about how to act. As we have shown, we deliberate about things within our control that require a decision.

This process uses the calculative part of intellectual virtue, making deliberation a result of an intellectual process—a method of assessing what is practically achievable. Important to mention, that there is a distinction between deliberation and good deliberation. Deliberation involves partial investigation. Good deliberation is a form of correctness and precision in deliberation. This is what we consider deliberation for the purpose of this article.

#### 3.1 Choice

Choice, on the other hand, is the decision or commitment to a course of action following deliberation, the outcome of deliberation, where we settle on the means to pursue a particular end by selecting a specific course of action to achieve the

desired result. For Aristotle, choice is a deliberate desire, arising from both reason and desire, engaging both the rational and irrational parts of the soul.

As choice involves both the rational and the appetitive parts of the soul, it is not merely a desire or impulse; rather, it is a rational commitment to act based on the conclusions of deliberation. Therefore, our focus is on deliberation, rather than on choice, as it is through deliberation that we engage the intellectual process necessary to determine the most appropriate course of action

#### 3.2 Decision-making

Decision-making, a commonly sought-after skill in job candidates across various industries in our current society, refers to the ability to make sound judgments that lead to effective decisions.

Zingano (2022), introduces the concept of decision-making in the context of virtue and practical wisdom, apparently bringing us back to moral virtue as the means of finding a balance between two extremes—a matter of character that ultimately influences deliberation.

However, he provides an essential conclusion that clarifies the issue and keeps our investigation of deliberation focused on intellectual virtue: 'Rationality—acting as reason directs—emerges as what agents recognize they ought to do, regardless of how unpleasant the consequences of their actions may be, as is particularly evident in courageous acts, such as facing death on the battlefield' [11].

#### 3.3 Practical Wisdom

Practical wisdom, an intellectual virtue and prudence, a moral virtue, play distinct but interconnected roles in achieving happiness according to Aristotle. Prudence is essential for fostering good actions by guiding moral virtues such as courage, justice, and temperance.

However, prudence alone does not lead to happiness, as it is primarily concerned with practical matters and the means to achieve goals. In contrast, wisdom, as part of the intellectual virtues, is superior because it involves contemplation of the highest truths, aligning the individual with reason and leading to a more profound form of happiness.

While wisdom is superior to prudence, the two virtues are interdependent. It is impossible to be prudent without moral virtue, as prudence requires a good character to properly deliberate about right actions. Similarly, moral virtues cannot be fully realized without prudence, since good actions must be chosen with rational deliberation. [12]

Thus, while wisdom plays an important role on the good deliberation, prudence remains indispensable in aligning moral virtues with reason, allowing the individual to act virtuously in practical situations. It is a characteristic of a person of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well.

## 4. Results

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is a guide to living a happy life, from its opening lines and throughout all ten books, ultimately concluding that happiness, in its highest form, is found in the contemplative life.

In Book VI, Aristotle states, "We contemplate the kind of things whose originative causes are invariable, and we contemplate variable things." [13].

Here, he highlights the importance of intellectual virtue in understanding the world, while distinguishing between the unchanging truths of contemplation and the variable, practical matters that require deliberation.

Deliberation occurs on the calculative side of the rational soul and deals with the mutable aspects of life, where choices are made in the realm of action and moral virtue.

### 4.1 Discussions

Regarding moral virtue, what does it take to live a virtuous life? This is where the concept of the Golden Mean comes into play. Virtue is the balance between two extremes and living by the Golden Mean principle involves choosing a course of action that strikes this balance. Achieving this, however, requires good deliberation.

We need to determine the appropriate response in any given situation, making moral virtue impossible without deliberation, which is influenced by moral at the same time, with a clear interdependency between the moral and the intellect: "choice cannot exist either without reason and intellect or without a moral state" [14].

Practical wisdom, the intellectual virtue that governs deliberation, allows individuals to deliberate correctly and act in accordance with moral virtue. Without good deliberation, even the most virtuous intentions can be misguided, leading to excess or deficiency.

Yet, the decision to cultivate good habits that lead to excellence is itself an act of deliberation. Likewise, the choice to pursue meaningful activities, rather than a life driven by mere amusement, where pleasure and pain dominate our decisions, is a form of deliberation toward living a life governed by reason.

### 4.2 Conclusion

Deliberation ensures that our actions are aligned with the mean, guiding us toward virtuous living, aligning our rational soul with our desires, choosing long-term well-being over short-term gratification.

Thus, while contemplation may represent the highest form of happiness, practical wisdom, and by extension deliberation, is what makes virtuous actions possible, ensuring that happiness is not just an intellectual ideal but a lived experience.

Deliberation is the process by which we balance extremes and choose the mean, cultivating habits that lead to moral excellence. It plays a crucial role in achieving happiness, as it guides us toward a life of virtue and reason. All human actions rely on deliberation—a choice between what we desire and what we rationally want.

By navigating life's variable aspects through deliberation, we make practical decisions necessary for living virtuously and developing good habits that ultimately impact happiness. This confirms the centrality of deliberation in the pursuit of happiness.

Aristotle acknowledges that, in addition to being virtuous, a person must also be sufficiently equipped with wealth, power, health, and opportunities to live a fully human life. Nevertheless, it is through our choices that we engage in virtuous acts.

Further investigation building on this conclusion is needed to determine whether deliberation is the most essential element of happiness, which could contribute to current studies in this field.

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