

# Prof. Rex Li's Writings

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**Title:** Aristotle's Ethics and Happiness  
A Summary and Review (Durant e-version p. 72 – 77)

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**Summary/ Abstract:** It appears what preoccupies Aristotle is the issue of best life / good / virtue. This is the same issue we face today!

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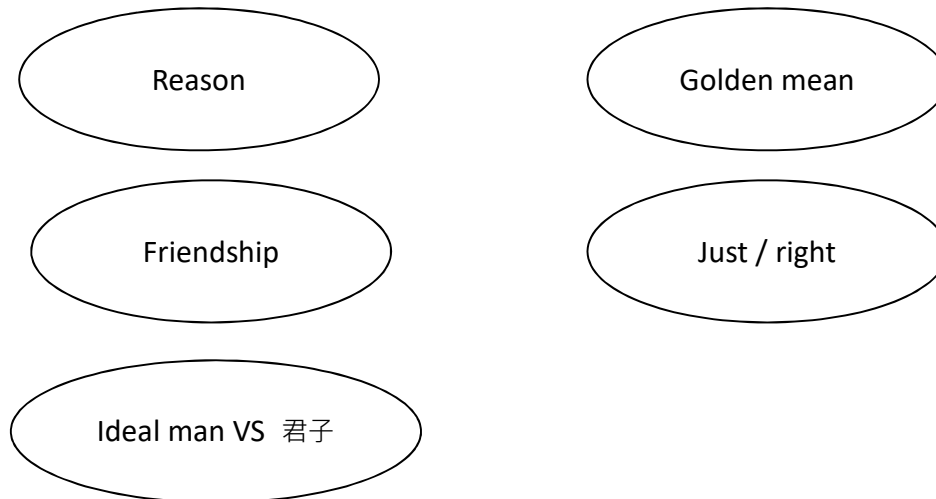
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**Aristotle's Ethics and Happiness**  
**A Summary and Review (Durant e-version p. 72 - 77)**

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**(A) Aristotle's Key Ideas**



**(B) Historical Context**

It appears what preoccupies Aristotle is the issue of best life / good / virtue. This can be an Athenian question when human civilization has reached far beyond subsistence level, and that there is a long period of social stability and predictable social organization. With astronomy and science propelled by Athenian navigation and trade, it fosters a historical and cultural environment for the pursuit of science and philosophy.

Now, when Plato conjures a political system of elitist rule going beyond democracy, Aristotle is more concerned with human ethics (man living in society).

**(C) Starting Premises**

He holds two starting premises:

- (1) Man is a rational animal (p. 71)
- (2) Society needs harmony.

## (D) Ideas in Ethics

From these he developed his ethics which includes:

- (1) Man has animal nature (p. 70)
- (2) Habit is second nature (p. 70)
- (3) Man has free will and enjoys freedom (p. 70)
- (4) Aesthetics is emotional expression of feeling (p. 71 – 72)
- (5) Art as imitation of reality (p. 71)
- (6) Man has pleasure in imitation (p. 71)
- (7) The final goal is happiness (p. 73)

happiness. "For we choose happiness for itself, and never with a view to anything further; whereas we choose honor, pleasure, intellect . . . because we believe that through them we shall be made happy."<sup>47</sup>

- (8) Happiness requires reason, judgement, self-control. It is the outcome of a fully-developed man.

The chief condition of happiness, then, barring certain physical prerequisites, is the life of reason—the specific glory and power of man. Virtue, or rather excellence,<sup>48</sup> will depend on clear judgment, self-control, symmetry of desire, artistry of means; it is not the possession of the simple man, nor the gift of innocent intent, but the achievement of experience in the fully developed man. Yet there is a road to

- (9) Golden mean – avoiding extremes. (It appears to be a Greek tradition further expanded by Aristotle, p. 75)

Durant's examples (p. 73)

Extremes	Golden Mean	Extremes
Cowardice	Courage	Realizes
Stinginess	Optimum	extravagance
Humility	Modesty	Pride
Quarrelsome	Friendship	Flattery
Secrecy	Honesty	Loquacity
Inactive	Self-control	Impulse

- (10) Excellence is an art by training and habit.

- (11) Virtue is an outcome of action, not just in the heart

"Virtues are formed in man by his doing the action." (p. 74) (R: Aristotle is pragmatic)

(12) Friendship is more important than justice.

important than justice: for “when men are friends, justice is unnecessary; but when men are just, friendship is still a boon.” “A friend is one

(13) Intellect, reason, brings real happiness. It rests on the mind:

the capture of truth. “The operation of the intellect . . . aims at no end beyond itself, and finds in itself the pleasure which stimulates it to further operation; and since the attributes of self-sufficiency, unweariedness, and capacity for rest, . . . plainly belong to this occupation, in it must lie perfect happiness.”<sup>58</sup>

(14) An ideal man

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He does not expose himself needlessly to danger, since there are few things for which he cares sufficiently; but he is willing, in great crises, to give even his life,—knowing that under certain conditions it is not worth while to live. He is of a disposition to do men service, though he is ashamed to have a service done to him. To confer a kindness is a mark of superiority; to receive one is a mark of subordination . . . He does not take part in public displays . . . He is open in his dislikes and preferences; he talks and acts frankly, because of his contempt for men and things . . . He is never fired with admiration, since there is nothing great in his eyes. He cannot live in complaisance with others, except it be a friend; complaisance is the characteristic of a slave . . . He never feels malice, and always forgets and passes over injuries . . . He is not fond of talking . . . It is no concern of his that he should be praised, or that others should be blamed. He does not speak evil of others, even of his enemies, unless it be to themselves. His carriage is sedate, his voice deep, his speech measured; he is not given to hurry, for he is concerned about only a few things; he is not prone to vehemence, for he thinks nothing very important. A shrill voice and hasty steps come to a man through care . . . He bears the accidents of

## (E) Review

- (1) It appears Aristotle’s justice is the golden mean, just right, avoid extremes. It was a Greek tradition further elaborated by him.
- (2) He starts from human reason and believes it can lead to happiness
- (3) In a sense of Aristotle moved away from Plato’s political manifesto of a public social domain to his own theory of ethics of a private individual domain. To be virtuous and happy, man must be well-educated and trained, so it is the ethics of a philosopher king.