

**A BRIEF EXAMINATION OF THE ETHICAL PROBLEM  
OF VIRTUE BY ARISTOTLE**

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*В статье рассматривается интерпретация философской проблемы блага и счастья, предложенная Аристотелем. Автор приходит к выводу о том, что, согласно Аристотелю, теория, или философское созерцание является высшим благом для человека.*

**Ключевые слова:** философия, Аристотель, благо, счастье, созерцание.

*The article discusses the interpretation of the philosophical problem of virtue and happiness suggested by Aristotle. The author finds out that according to Aristotle theoria, or philosophical contemplation is the highest virtue for a human being.*

**Keywords:** philosophy, Aristotle, virtue, happiness, contemplation.

The inherent purpose of human existence is a fundamental inquiry explored since the first civilizations. Aristotle emphasized that virtue is a necessary human good. He considered the aims of human existence, and how virtue applies to these aims: namely, happiness, honor. This paper briefly outlines the basic philosophical principles of the philosophical tradition of Aristotle, in order to provide an informative account about the most important in his ethical teaching.

Contrary to what many might think, Aristotle presented a rather comprehensible, and practical, examination of the aim of human life in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. In this famous work, Aristotle bases his inquiry not on abstract theory, but on human events and practices. He begins by observing that every art and inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good, and therefore the good is that toward which all things aim.

The good entails a productive outcome; a beneficial end in accordance to nature. Some activities are pursued intrinsically, such as playing an instrument or studying, because the process within these activities is the reward itself. Other activities are pursued for the sake of products apart from the actions, such as medicine. In the latter case, it is the nature of the products to be better than the actions that produced them. Yet, since not everything can be pursued for the sake of something else, as this would go on to infinity, there must be a single, supreme end, for whose sake everything else is pursued. Aristotle refers to the beliefs of the common run of people for an answer; namely, that happiness is the highest aim of life, as identified with living well and doing well. He acknowledges that an account of what happiness is must be given, and how it can be achieved.

Naturally, people's views of happiness differ, and the majority do not give the same account as the wise. The former are less inclined to reflect, and therefore consider happiness to be some obvious or plain thing: pleasure, wealth, and common enjoyments. People of superior refinement consider honor to be a greater source of happiness; but Aristotle dismisses honor as too superficial, because honor depends on those who bestow it upon us. By contrast, the good for man is an intrinsic, self-sufficient quality that cannot be taken away from him, such as wisdom. Nonetheless, people pursue honor in order to be assured of their goodness, which indicates that they have interest in excellence.

Aristotle briefly mentions the life of contemplation as the highest and pertaining to a few, and deliberately reserves it for later discussion. He then proceeds to specify that human nature is rooted in activity, and that it is virtuous activity that is the source of the human good. Virtue is a form of excellence achieved through habitual discipline.

Specifically, Aristotle defines virtue as an adequately judged mean that lies between the extremes of excess and deficiency. Examples of virtue include temperance, a mean between indulgence and self-neglect; courage, between brashness and cowardice; humility, between arrogance and self-deprecation; and wisdom, between ignorance and excessive bookishness. Aristotle concludes that, since happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be that of the best thing in us. This is our highest capacity, which is reason. Reason directs the development of all virtues, yet some virtues are rooted exclusively in moral habits, such as temperance and courage. Moral virtues do not yield self-sufficient results, and are therefore not a primary source of happiness. Other virtues are intellectual skills, such as knowledge in sciences and crafts. The highest virtue in us, involving our reason, is *theoria*, or philosophical contemplation: the active contemplation of our existing knowledge.

This activity of philosophical contemplation is the most self-sufficient and rewarding for a human being, as it is not in need of anything else. Moreover, in *theoria*, the mind contemplates the highest objects of interest, including the universe, and this provides a certain immortality to our conditional, finite existence. Aristotle concludes that we must strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything.

Contemplation is also the most resilient and unconditional activity, because we can contemplate the truth more continuously than we can *do* anything.

Since happiness consists of the intrinsic pleasure in virtuous practice, this activity of philosophic wisdom is the most pleasant of all virtuous activities, as it offers “pleasures marvelous for their purity and enduringness” [1, p. 76–77].

Aristotle’s account on the supreme source of happiness for a human being is a source of extensive debate, as there are practical limitations – such as familial and political obligations – that would hinder a person’s continual devotion to this fulfilling pursuit. And, since Aristotle concedes that happiness cannot be achieved in the face of extreme misfortune or burdens, then happiness cannot be considered an unconditional aim of human existence.

## **Литература**

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